

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW: READING COMPREHENSION IN THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXTS

*‘Teachers have to learn how to teach reading comprehension strategies and procedures. Teachers can do this by becoming more aware of, and being prepared on the procedures and processes of good comprehension of text. Teachers need to learn how to interact with students during the reading of a text to teach them reading comprehension strategies at the right time and right place’*  
(National Reading Panel - NRP, 2000:4-94)

#### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I gave a short overview of reading comprehension to conceptualise my inquiry. In Chapter 2, I will offer a literature review, by providing a summary of empirical studies related to aspects of the teaching of reading comprehension in the international and South African contexts. I will comment on some of the current debates concerning the teaching of reading comprehension. Although a formidable body of knowledge exists on concepts like models of teaching reading comprehension, metacognitive and cognitive strategies when using reading comprehension strategies, I will identify aspects of reading comprehension relevant to my study and identify gaps in the literature. Reading strategies can be useful to help learners become proficient readers. Decoding is also one of the most important foundational skills. Learners should be able to recognise the types of relationship between written and spoken words. If teachers can be aware of this relationship, they will teach learners during reading activities. Usually, where there is a comprehension problem, at the root of that difficulty is a decoding problem. In essence, teaching learners proven decoding strategies such as teaching them sound and letters provides them with a strong foundation to ensure reading success. Therefore, if children are still struggling with readings skills in the third grade, odds are, they will be struggling the rest of their lives (Wren, 2001:12).

In the next sections, I will thus give a brief summary of empirical studies done internationally and nationally in order to highlight their importance to the teaching of

reading comprehension. I will commence with an explanation of reading acquisition as a process, as reading comprehension cannot take place without it. Thereafter, I will present a discussion of studies on this topic in the international context. This study does not attempt to measure learner performance, but investigates the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners in order to explore how teachers teach reading comprehension in their classrooms.

In this chapter, some older sources are referenced to indicate the long road that has already been travelled to improve reading comprehension in learners. The United States, for example, is the one country in the world where reading research has been done for many years. Additionally, for a variety of historical, political and theoretical reasons, American's views of comprehension of text have changed. Text is no longer regarded as a fixed object that the reader is supposed to depend on as closely as possible as he or she reads. Instead, the text is viewed as a blueprint for meaning. The reason being that according to their view no text is ever fully explicit, no text ever specifies all the relationships among events; this means that readers play a much more active and constructive role in their own comprehension (Pearson, 1985:726). An active and constructive model of comprehension has enormous implications for the role of the classroom teacher in promoting comprehension. This is because a teacher can no longer regard the text as the ultimate criterion for defining what comprehension is, but must view the text along with learners' prior knowledge, learners' strategies, the task or task given to learners and the classroom environment (Pearson, 1985:726).

## **2.2 The reading acquisition process**

There are five stages of how reading is acquired, namely pre reader, emergent reader, early reader, developing reader, early fluent reader and independent reader (DOE, 2008:10-11):

- During the pre reader stage, the learner is expected to hold the book and turn pages correctly, recognise the beginning and the end of the page, listen and respond to stories, interpret the pictures, pretend to read loudly and silently, know some letters and show interest in print and point at them whenever they see signs and labels, and create stories out of pictures;

- The emergent readers uses pictures to tell stories, know some sounds and some letters that could make a sound, are aware that reading strategies from left to right, like to join someone who is reading, recognise some words, and read some familiar books;
- The early fluent reader knows some letter sounds and names, recognises some common words, can retell a story, uses pictures to make meaning of the written text, reads alouds when reading to self, reads word for word loudly, reads early readers and picture books with pattern, repetition and rhyme;
- The developing reader uses pictures to make reading, uses knowledge of sentence structure, uses phonics to decode words, combines words into phrases, retells the beginning, the middle and the end of the story, can also give some details of the story, use punctuation marks, reads silently, corrects himself/herself, reads books with large prints.
- During the fluent reader stage, learners move from learning to read, to reading to learn. In this stage, the reader builds up a substantial background of knowledge of spelling. The learner recognises most familiar words on sight, reads fluently at least 60 words per minute, use punctuation to enhance comprehension, stops at all full stops, and begins to understand implied meaning.
- Learners in the independent reader stage read fluently and read more advanced books. They read and understand the implied meaning of the text.

### **2.3 Comprehension in the international context**

There are various international studies conducted on reading comprehension indicating that there can be no doubt that learners' reading comprehension performance has been a concern to teachers. In America, more than ever before, they are devoting much intellectual and emotional energy to helping learners to read and understand the texts in their schools (Pearson, 1985: 724).

For a variety of historical, political and theoretical reasons, Americans' views of comprehension of text have changed. Text is no longer regarded as a fixed object that the reader is supposed to depend on as closely as possible as he or she reads. Instead, the text is viewed as a blueprint for meaning. The reason being that

according to their view no text is ever fully explicit, no text ever specifies all the relationships among events. This means that readers play a much more active and constructive role in their own comprehension (Pearson, 1985:726).

An active and constructive model of comprehension has enormous implications for the role of the classroom teacher in promoting comprehension. This is because a teacher can no longer regard the text as the ultimate criterion for defining what comprehension is, but must view the text along with learners' prior knowledge, learners' strategies, the task or task given to learners and the classroom environment (Pearson, 1985:726).

Durkin (1979) states that the meaning of the text does not reside in the words on a page, but is constructed in the mind of the reader supports this view. That is why proficient readers actively use a set of comprehension strategies to help construct meaning as they read, while struggling readers are less aware and have less control over their comprehension process when reading. As a result, a number of strategies to increase reading comprehension were recommended by the National Reading Panel in America (NRP, 2000; Snow, 2002; Noles & Dole, 2004). In this study, I shall review these strategies as they were research-based, for example, monitoring, graphic and semantic organisers, questioning, question answering, and question generating (NRP, 2000).

Durkin (1978) did a related study in America in fourth-grade classrooms through observations. One of the goals of this study was to determine when and how often teachers are engaged in direct, explicit instruction for comprehension skills, that is, what do teachers tell learners about how they should perform the various comprehension tasks assigned on the myriad of worksheets and workbook pages.

The study revealed that very little time is spent in the classrooms on explicit reading comprehension instruction. In the seventy-five hours of reading that Durkin observed that year, teachers devoted less than 1% of the time to teaching learners how to comprehend and learn new information from reading (Durkin, 1978). It was discovered that teachers only monitored learners' comprehension by asking questions after they had finished reading a text instead of teaching specific strategies to help learners develop comprehension skills (Swanson & De La Paz,

1998). Much of the time devoted to reading instruction went into giving and checking written assignments or filling in workbook and ditto sheets, with the assumption that readers would simply discover the inherent meaning in printed texts and then transmit this knowledge.

Durkin (1981) then conducted a similar analysis of manuals to assist the teacher with basal readers, looking for instances of comprehension instruction, which the readers fell short of what Durkin calls “substantive instruction” for the teachers. Durkin (1981:515-544) further stated that “there was rarely much in the way of modelling, guided practice, or substantive feedback suggested in their classroom observation.” It seemed as if there was little guidance provided for the teachers on how to teach reading comprehension.

Armbruster *et al.*, (2003:53) provide guidelines on how to teach reading comprehension strategies. They state that the reading comprehension lesson should take various steps. These include direct explanation, where the teacher explains to learners why the strategy helps comprehension and when to apply the strategy, and how to determine a strategy that is relevant to the understanding of the text. Modelling is where the teacher models, or demonstrates how to apply the strategy, usually by thinking aloud while reading the text that the learners are using. Guided practice is where the teacher guides and assists learners as they learn how and when to apply the strategy. Application is where the teacher engages learners in discussion about how they are applying the strategy and provide the necessary corrective feedback.

To support these steps, the question may arise as to how teachers can embed all the strategies. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke, Pearson, Schatschneider and Torgeson (2010), and Snowball (2005) emphasise that teachers should explain how strategies can help learners learn from the text as opposed to having them memorise the strategies. In addition, they should learn how to use the strategies effectively. This implies that teachers must first tell learners why and when they should use strategies, what strategies to use and how to apply them before starting to read the text. Learners need to be taught explicitly the use of comprehension skills when they read (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampson & Echevaria, 1998; Pressley, 2000). It is not enough that teachers should

ask questions and supervise the completion of exercises; they need to explain to learners how expert readers make sense of the text. Teachers have to teach learners the skills that could help them to understand the texts and they need to learn how, when and where to use these skills (Pearson, Roehler, Dole & Duffy, 1992).

Tregenza and Lewis (2008) conducted a yearlong classroom observations action research project. The study was on teaching reading explicitly, and on how to use and reflect on a range of active comprehension strategies. During their classroom observations, the study showed the following: reading comprehension strategies can be taught and by doing, to help and build the learner's reading comprehension. Learners reusing strategies until they become familiar may be helpful in developing fluency and autonomy in using such strategies. The explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies into shared and guided reading sessions should be part of the whole-school approach to learning to read (Tregenza & Lewis, 2008).

Pressley *et al.*, (1998) did another study related to my research project. The study examined reading instruction in 10 fourth-grade and fifth-grade classrooms. The study revealed that there was little comprehension instruction and an emphasis on assessing comprehension, but not on the teaching of reading comprehension strategies. Taylor, Peterson, Pearson and Rodriguez (2000) had similar findings when they observed literacy instruction in 88 classrooms with Grades 1 to 4. Pearson and Duke (2002) assert that many primary-grade teachers have not emphasised comprehension instruction in their curriculum. In the same vein, during their classroom observations, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) executed in America, revealed little evidence of comprehension instruction in the primary grades.

In their study of the implementation and effects of explicit reading comprehension instruction in fifth-grade classrooms, Andreassen and Braten (2010:520) found that elementary school teachers in America, as well as in Europe, still seem to be unsure about how to teach reading comprehension. Consequently, these teachers often test rather than teach comprehension by just concentrating on asking learners questions about text content after reading. In the United States, according to the research review in comprehension instruction conducted by Butler *et al.*(2010), one

learner in four lacks basic grade-level reading skills in public schools' eighth grades. In addition, these learners do not understand grade-appropriate materials (Butler *et al.*, 2010).

Evidence from the 1996 National English Literacy Survey in Australia indicated that the proportion of year three and five learners in their schools that did not meet the minimum performance standards of reading required for effective participation in further schooling was estimated to be as high as 27% at year three and 29% at year five (Masters & Forster, 1997). In 2003, the percentages of Australian learners not achieving the minimum national benchmarks for reading were 8% (year three) and 11% (year five and seven). In Australia, according to Lyon (2003), there is evidence from the National Center for Educational Statistics that 38% of fourth graders (nine year olds) nationally cannot read at a basic level, and cannot read and understand a short paragraph similar to that in a children's storybook. A similar situation exists in South Africa, as reported by the PIRLS (2006) report.

In Canada, according to results from yearly provincial assessments conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), the educational system has not prepared all learners for a life in a literacy-rich society. For instance, the results from the May 2002 tests show that 50% of the provinces' Grade 3 learners scored below grade-level expectancy in reading (Hamilton Wentworth District School Board Results, 2004). This relates to the South African context as revealed by the PIRLS (2006) report. In addition, according to Jamieson (2009), in Canada many student teachers complete their university teacher preparation programmes without learning the basic scientific principles behind the development of reading skills and effective reading instruction. As a result, the substantial body of knowledge on how to teach children to read, how to identify children who have failed to acquire specific reading skills, and how to intervene effectively is not being applied in many Canadian classrooms (Jamieson, 2009:6).

Another study was done regarding reading comprehension in Argentina with learners in the last year of the primary grade. Learners took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2000). The results revealed that learner performance was relatively at a very low level. Studies showed that 70% of the individuals achieved under the international average and that almost 54% of the

students who were assessed had only mastered the most general aspects of reading competence.

However, there are countries that are doing very well in reading literacy in Grade 3 and across all grades. Finland scrapped its old education system, which placed learners into either vocational or academic tracks at the end of the fourth grade and developed a system of free public education from Grade 1 to Grade 9. In 2003, Finland ranked first among 40 industrialised nations in reading literacy. According to PISA (2006), Finland also boasts the smallest gap between its best and weakest learners, and the second smallest difference amongst individual schools' performance. In order to become a teacher across all grades, the requirement was at least a Master's degree. This means that there is emphasis on qualifications for teachers in Finland. Another important aspect in Finland's education system, which Moore (2003) highlighted, was that classes were small, averaging 20 to 25 learners. This result is an indication that there is a need for urgent attention in teaching reading comprehension.

Singapore also participated in the PIRLS study of 2001 for the purpose of international comparison of reading skills. The results ranked Singapore 15<sup>th</sup> out of 45 countries. Five years later, in 2006, Singapore once more participated in the PIRLS study. The results then ranked Singapore as one of the three top performing countries out of 45 countries. Factors that contributed to the positive results include aspects such as high percentage of learners who had pre-school education, the increasing proportion of students who used English at home, well-resourced schools, an English language syllabus with strong emphasis on language use, a nationwide professional development oriented towards teaching within the syllabus (Singapore Government, 2007). Based on the above results from PIRLS, Wong (2006; 2007) conducted a study in thirteen Grade 3 classrooms in Singapore. The aim of the study was to find out more about the teaching of reading. Pedagogical practices in the teaching of reading lessons in the third grade were examined, focusing on what was happening in reading lessons that might account for Singapore's positive results.

The study by Wong (2006; 2007) revealed that teachers used an Initiation-Response Evaluation (IRE) pattern for classroom interactions. The IRE pattern is a



teacher-led, three-part sequence that begins with the teacher asking a learner a question or introducing a topic to find out whether the learner knows the answer (Hall & Walsh, 2002). In the IRE pattern the learner's answer is evaluated by the teacher, who makes a brief reply such as 'good' or 'no, that is not right' (Hall & Walsh, 2002). According to Wong (2006), there was an emphasis on answering worksheet questions, with little if any meaningful, authentic talk. Concerning comprehension, Wong (2006) found that absent from teacher led lessons was an in-depth discussion of audience, authorship, or meaning beyond the most basic level. Evidently, the picture revealed by the studies conducted in different countries indicates that there can be no doubt that learners' reading comprehension performance is a concern.

It is clear that there are different educational situations in different countries regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. There are countries that are doing very well in teaching reading comprehension and those that are in similar situations as in South Africa. In every situation, there are lessons to be learnt. From the countries with very low score, we gain information. Those that are doing well can become our model – we can learn from them. We can take the best and adapt it to our own context to address our problems. In the context of the study, this information can help teachers to become more informed about the teaching of reading comprehension. In the next section, I discuss reading comprehension in the South African context.

## **2.4 South African policies and the teaching of reading comprehension**

I examined a number of empirical studies and reports on reading comprehension related to primary grades in the South African context. Few studies have focused on measuring learner performance in reading their mother tongue (L1) and there is little research on the topic of the teaching of reading comprehension, especially in the African languages. International and national studies, which focused on systemic evaluation, have shown that South African learners are below international standards in both mathematics and literacy. With regard to reading, SACMEQ 11 (2004) found that the overall reading level of Grade 6 learners in South Africa to be at level 3, which is referred to as basic reading. PIRLS (2006) also showed that South African Grade 4 and 5 learners performed second below the international

mean of 500 points at 302 points. Also, the South African Department of Education's systemic evaluation (2007) showed that grade achievement scores for literacy were 36%, which is an indication that large numbers of South African learners cannot understand what they are reading.

According to The Sunday Times (2000:1), South African learners were once referred to as the 'dunces of Africa.' This was because of the findings of the comparative study on literacy and numeracy rates of primary school learners that was conducted in 12 countries in Africa. These results are an indicator of poor performance by South African learners as compared with their African peers on both literacy and numeracy measures. Another study related to my study was the 2001 audit undertaken by the South African National Department of Education (The Star, 2008:7) to assess literacy levels across the nine provinces of the country. The survey showed that only 38% of Grade 3 learners could read at grade level in their mother tongue. This implies that reading comprehension is indeed a challenge to teachers.

In 2002, a school-based report (DoE, 2002) was published on research done on learner performance in literacy. The research was commissioned by the Western Cape Education Department. It conducted standardised literacy and numeracy tests for Grade 3 (DoE, 2002). The study revealed a low level of reading performance amongst learners.

In their study, Kilfoil and Van der Walt (1997) raised the concern that quite often the teacher makes no effort to treat the comprehension text as a communication in which learners can develop the strategies that will enable them to make sense of comprehension text as communication. According to them, a typical reading comprehension lesson may follow the following steps:

- The teacher may explain or teach the vocabulary and then read the text aloud;
- The learners may then read the text silently alone;
- The teachers may go through the set question with the learners who may respond orally or by imitating and thereafter answers are checked.

However, Kilfoil and Van der Walt (1997:167) are against this method of reading and point out that the method has many weaknesses. Examples of these are that the comprehension passage may not be a text that has been written primarily for its communicative value, but it might have been written to exemplify a single grammatical structure, and therefore may not be suitable for effective reading comprehension. This means that the question can be answered using the exact words of the passage, whereby the learners bypass any meaningful comprehension and merely depend on recognition of linguistic and lexical items that are common to other questions.

According to Cooper (2000), Duke and Pearson (2002), Marzano, Pickering and Pallack (2001) and Tompkins (2001), the reading comprehension lesson may follow various steps, namely:

- Explanation, where the teachers explain to learners why the strategy helps comprehension;
- Modelling, where the teacher models or demonstrate how to apply the strategy, usually by thinking aloud while reading a text;
- Guided practice, where the teacher guides and assists learners as they learn how and when to apply the strategy;
- Application, where the teacher helps learners to practise the strategy until they can apply it independently.

The 2007 PIRLS study relates closely to my topic as Tshivenda- speaking learners were also included in PIRLS. This study makes an important contribution as it describes trends and international comparisons for literacy performance. It started in 2001 and included three countries, which increased to 40 countries in 2006 (PIRLS, 2007). Because of the importance of PIRLS to my study, it is appropriate to give a synopsis of the PIRLS study. The PIRLS study was a quantitative research with the aim of describing trends and international comparisons for the following:

- The reading achievement of Grade 4 learners;
- Learners' competencies in relation to goals and standards for reading education;
- The impact of the home environment and how parents foster reading literacy;

- The organisation of time and reading materials for learning to read in schools;
- Curriculum and classroom approaches to reading instruction.

Campbell, Kelly, Mullis and Sainsbury (2001), Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez and Kennedy (2003), and Mullis, Kennedy, Martin and Sainsbury (2004) state that PIRLS focuses on three aspects of reading literacy, namely processes of comparison, purposes of reading and reading behaviours and attitudes. The PIRLS study revealed that South Africa with its vast resources scored the worst out of 40 countries that took part in the study. Almost 80% of South African primary school learners did not reach the lowest benchmark. Overall scores place South Africa at the bottom of the list for reading achievement. South African learners performed better in informational texts (316 points) than literacy texts (299 points). The study showed that the relative difference between the two scores was one of the highest of all countries. Concerning reading comprehension processes, learners achieved a score of 307 in retrieving and making straightforward inferences; and this placed South African learners among the poorest performers. This study further indicated that 86-96% of children who speak an African language did not reach the lowest benchmark. It is important to note that the low marks were not caused by inadequate knowledge of English, since the tests were carried out in all 11 official languages. This might indicate that the problem in South Africa is a reading problem, not specifically a language problem.

According to Van Staden and Howie (2008), the importance of the PIRLS study is to establish nationwide empirical data that can be used to inform decisions on curriculum and language policy. The concern from this international study was that South African learners cannot read and write, and are unable to execute the tasks that demonstrate key skills associated with literacy and numeracy. However, many researchers indicated that the PIRLS study did not give a clear explanation of how young children are taught to read and comprehend the text and what is needed to improve the reading literacy of young children in South Africa. According to Long and Zimmerman (2008), the PIRLS 2006 study only focused on the implementation of the reading literacy curriculum in the Foundation Phase and not on the teaching thereof. This implies that there are a high number of learners without basic reading skills and strategies to cope with academic tasks in schools. In an analysis per

language the PIRLS study revealed that Tshivenda learners also fell below the international mean of 560 on reading literacy. The results for learner performance in the National Systemic Evaluation (NSE) were appalling. The overall result for Grade 3 learners was a score of 54% in the literacy test. The study showed that, with regards to reading, all provinces scored less than 50%, except KwaZulu-Natal.

In addition, NSE (2010) found that learners performed better in multiple-choice questions as opposed to free-response questions. According to the study, the results were an indication that learners struggled to produce their own written answers. The study identified contributory factors, such as teachers' lack of training in the fundamental theories of child development, learning language acquisition schema formation and practical methodology involved in teaching reading successfully, lack of communicative language teaching; little or no personal experience of reading, lack of the ability to model literacy activities or to create a print-rich environment that will motivate the learners to value reading; and lack of textbooks in vernacular languages. In the same vein, Scheepers (2008) confirms that there is a dearth of both fiction and nonfiction titles published in indigenous languages and, as a result, learners have limited opportunities to develop vocabulary in their home language.

Another study related closely to my research project is on the evaluation of Grade 3 learners conducted across the country by the Department of Education (DoE, 2008). It revealed that most of the learners in the primary grades could not read and that only 36% of Grade 3 learners could read or count. Concerning literacy, the lowest ranking province was Limpopo, which scored only 29%. Against this background, the then Minister of Education stated that "we are falling short of our target of 50% mean performance in the country. In my view, this is just not good enough. Our learners deserve more and are capable to achieve much more" (DoE, 2008).

The significance this research has for my study is the finding that Limpopo scored only 29% in literacy. Some of the reasons given for low reading and counting were associated with language problems as the study regarded it as invalid that English and Afrikaans learners scored higher than those who learnt in indigenous languages. In addition, the study of Reeves *et al.*, (2008: xx) revealed that teachers

were uncertain about how to approach the teaching of reading and writing and what strategies to use when teaching reading. Most teachers say they have received little or no specialised practical theory on how to teach reading and writing from the Limpopo DoE.

According to The Times, “literacy and numeracy test scores are low by African and global standards” (13 June 2011:8). Recently, ANA (2010) showed that Grade 3 achievement scores for literacy stood at 36%. In the ANA study, Mpumalanga and Limpopo fall at the bottom on the list (The Times, 29June2011:5). Based on the results the Minister of Basic Education confirmed that the results were an indication that there had been an under-emphasis on the development of the basic skills of reading and that the education sector needed to focus more on its core functions of quality learning and teaching in schools. This implies that up to now, despite the intervention strategies, South African learners still cannot read and understand what they are reading. In the following sections, I shall describe the intervention strategies which were implemented by the DoE to address reading instruction and reading comprehension.

It is clear that South African learners’ level of reading comprehension is very low and needs urgent attention. It seems to be good to have studies, surveys and annual national assessments as a country to gauge our learner performances and to know where we are as a country. There is however, a need for change in the classroom so that learners can enjoy reading and construct meaning from the text. Within the context of my study, the findings from the various studies and national assessment will assist me in recognising the importance and seriousness of my topic of enquiry.

## **2.5 The policies and the teaching of reading comprehension**

International policies provide insights into what is happening in other countries regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. In the South African context there are many policies designed to address reading in the Foundation Phase.

In this section, I elaborate on the relevant South African policy documents as recommended for the primary grades. With the first South African democratic

elections in 1994, various changes in the education system of South Africa came to the fore. These changes brought about the South African Schools Act of 1996 (DoE,1996), which indicates that all schools should be self-governing. The current South African curriculum for teaching reading in Grade 3, which was introduced in 2002, is guided by various documents. Two policies were launched, namely the Language-in-Education policy and the Norms and Standards regarding Language Policy. According to the Department of Education (DoE, 2002) the Language-in-Education policy document should be seen as a continuous process. Concerning the curriculum, the constitution was the main basis of the transformation and development of the curriculum. The government adopted a multilingual language policy that recognises 11 languages as official, Tshivenda included. The constitution of South Africa recommended that the home language should be used for teaching where possible in the Foundation Phase, in which learners learn to read and write. The South African situation is not exceptional. There are other countries that have experienced similar problems, for example, in Namibia, the MEC recommended that all learning in the early stages, wherever possible, the mother tongue should be through medium of instruction as the MEC (1993:22) expresses the importance of mother tongue as follows:

All learning in the early stages is done best in the mother tongue, and this also provides the best foundation for later learning in another language medium. Therefore, wherever possible, the medium of instruction must be the mother tongue or the familial local language.

This statement shows that South Africa and Namibia share the same experiences and the view that the mother tongue is foundational for learning. The learner can proceed to Level 2 after he/she has gained basic communication in the mother tongue.

### **2.5.1 The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)**

To improve the quality of teaching the National Curriculum Statement was later revised to be the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE, 2002). With regard to reading comprehension strategies the NCS for Home language (2002) stated that teaching strategies must enable the learner to “read texts alone, and uses a variety of strategies to make meaning.”With regards to reading comprehension the RNCS

(DoE, 2002:72) Learning Outcome 3: reading and viewing requires learners in the following: “The learners will be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional contexts.”

Therefore, the learner must “read a printed text fluently with understanding” (DoE, 2002). More emphasis was placed on communicative language and literacy teaching (Prinsloo & Janks, 2002) and more teaching time was allocated to language and mathematics.

When analysing the critical outcomes, it became clear that reading comprehension remains the critical aspect throughout the curriculum, because learners could collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information, communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes. Therefore, teachers must be effectively taught how to teach reading comprehension. According to the DoE (2002), the critical outcomes are implemented through the learning outcomes as illustrated by the language policy and the development of learning programmes in the Foundation Phase. The reading comprehension skills are emphasised as learners are expected to read various texts with understanding and to use this information in various situations. However, there seem to be no clear guidelines for teachers as to how reading comprehension should be taught in schools, which strategies to use before, during and after reading the text. Mankveld and Pepler (2004) confirms that the RNCS only stresses the importance of language development especially in the primary grades, but does not provide guidelines on how to teach and facilitate literacy acquisition at this level. This is an indication that the teacher envisaged by the policy is not the teacher that is currently in the classrooms.

### **2.5.2 The National Curriculum Statement (NCS)**

From 2006 the RNCS was again revised and renamed the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2006). The NCS was introduced in an attempt to improve the teaching of reading. It provided more time for the teaching of reading and gave guidance on a balanced approach to the teaching of literacy. The NCS contains the learning programmes, work schedule, lesson plans and the assessment guidelines for the specific subjects. The outcomes describe the knowledge, skills and values



that learners should acquire and demonstrate during the learning process. With regard to languages, the learning outcomes are clearly specified, namely, listening, speaking, reading and viewing, writing thinking and reasoning, including language structure and use. Each of the learning outcomes has criteria that collectively describe what a learner should know and be able to demonstrate. For this study Learning Outcome 3, reading and viewing, is applicable and it states: “The learner is able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts” (DoE, 2002: 72).

The Learning Outcomes describe what knowledge, skills and values learners should achieved at the end of the phase and is achieved through the assessment standards. In order for us to know that learners have achieved Learning Outcome 3, reading and viewing, the assessment standards states that the learners are able to:

- Use visual cues to make meaning;
- Make meaning of written text;
- Read text alone and use a variety of strategies to make meaning;
- Consolidate phonic knowledge;
- Read for information and enjoyment.

However, it seems as if the abovementioned learning outcomes and assessment standards have not been achieved. PIRLS (2006) revealed that learners are developing reading comprehension at a very slow pace. According to Scheepers (2008:33), very little explicit attention is given to vocabulary acquisition in schools and little attention is paid to meaning. This was supported by the study conducted in Limpopo by Reeves *et al.*, (2008), which also indicated a low level of reading amongst the learners.

According to JET Education Services (2010), the principal weakness identified in the NCS is the lack of specificity and example. While curriculum documents are designed to give broad guidelines, JET Education Services (2010) indicates that in South Africa teachers have been asked to develop a learning programme based on the NCS. Due to the poor qualifications of many teachers, the majority have not been able to do this successfully. The crippling result has been a lack of logical progression of teaching and learning in schools that need it most. Another problem is the interpretation of the language in education policy and implementation of the

NCS. Many learners are taught and assessed against the English first additional language curriculum in the Foundation Phase and are expected to develop English home language proficiency overnight as they move into the Intermediate Phase. Because of the problems identified in the NCS, the DoE introduced different campaigns to improve literacy and the teaching of reading as part of the governmental response to low performance of learners in schools.

### **2.5.3 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)**

In 2012, the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) will be implemented in the Foundation Phase (Department of Basic Education (DBE)). It is important to note that the CAPS is a refinement of the NCS. However, to reach the outcomes is not spelled out. In this document, there are no clear guidelines for the African language teacher about reading comprehension strategies, which strategies to use before, during and after reading the text. The CAPS for the Foundation Phase divides the requirements for reading into shared reading, group reading, paired and independent reading and phonics. Concerning comprehension, the CAPS (2012) only explains to the teacher that during the reading lessons the teacher must engage the learners in a range of thinking and questioning activities. The CAPS explains that the teacher may use various ways to start questions that will help to develop lower-order and higher-order comprehension skills, namely literal comprehension, reorganisation, inferential, evaluation and appreciation. Teachers are expected to model reading, and work on metacognitive skills to teach learners to monitor themselves when reading. This could bring an improvement in the teaching of reading comprehension. However, there are no clear explanations of the strategies which teachers must use to develop the metacognitive skills, when to use each strategy (before, during and/or after reading) and the reason for using it. The question that one may be tempted to ask is: Will the CAPS provide Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking teachers with guidelines and relevant examples that they can use to improve the teaching of reading comprehension?

### **2.5.4 The Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC)**

The FFLC, as the first intervention, was launched by the then Minister of Education in 2007(DoE, 2008). The aim was to improve learners' performance in the area of

literacy and numeracy amongst Foundation Phase learners. However, JET Education Services (2010) state that the foundations for learning should offer more guidelines that are specific to teachers. Four documents were produced that include directives regarding the use of particular methodologies when teaching literacy, designing the timetable, resourcing the classroom and assessing learners, and documents on the teaching of reading in the early grades, assessment framework books, and quarterly assessment activities. Assessment activities for literacy and numeracy Grades 1-3 including lessons were made available. According to JET Education Services (2010), the key disadvantage of the campaign was the overwhelming number of documents the teachers had to coordinate to plan instruction. This process was further hampered by a lack of documents in languages other than English, new terminology, a disjuncture between some milestones and the NCS as well as poor phonics progression.

### **2.5.5 Teaching Reading in the Early Grades**

A teachers' handbook, *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* by the DoE (2008) was the second intervention strategy used to meet the crisis of reading amongst the learners as part of the Foundation for learning project. The handbook covers various aspects of reading: characteristics of skilled readers, the stages of reading development, phonemic awareness, word recognition (phonics and sight words), comprehension, vocabulary and fluency. The teacher is required to involve learners in shared reading, guided reading, reading aloud and independent reading. Although I deal with learning theories in Chapter 3, I refer to their relevancy when describing the teaching of reading comprehension in the early grades, for example, learning theories are critical as I regard them as foundational for any teaching profession. In their classrooms, teachers work with different learners and they do not learn at the same pace. It is important for the teachers to know these learning theories in order to help learners. There are several approaches to teaching reading comprehension such as shared reading and guided reading. During shared reading, guided reading, independent reading and read-aloud sessions, the teacher can teach learners comprehension strategies and how to apply them (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2002; Van Keer, 2004, Trogenza & Lewis, 2009).

### **2.5.5.1 Shared reading**

In a shared reading session, the teacher reads with the class or group using a large storybook that has big, bold print (DoE, 2008). Learners share the reading task with the teacher and gradually learners take over the task of reading (DoE, 2008). The purpose of shared reading is explained as follows: The teacher models reading strategies to learners using Big Books and addressing specific skills in reading.

During the lesson, the teacher leads a discussion of the cover and some of the illustrations in the book to place the text within the context of learners' prior knowledge, and encourages learners to predict what will happen in the story. The teacher reads using a pointer to point at the words as she/he reads. After reading, the teacher checks the learners' understanding of the text through discussion or questions.

The benefits of shared reading are that the teacher models different reading comprehension strategies for the learners. The planned activities should cater for different learners' abilities by allowing them to join in wherever they can and the environment must be non-threatening for learners to experience success. During shared reading the teacher is expected to teach learners while they read certain kinds of texts, how they read the text, the expression and intonation (tone of voice) suited to the text, how to respond to the text, the text level, word level or sentence level features in the text and model.

The teacher is expected to teach a variety of reading strategies and promote comprehension through differentiated questioning and discussion (DoE, 2008).

### **2.5.5.2 Group guided reading**

Group guided reading is regarded as one of the key components of a balanced language programme (Hornsby, 2000; Cunningham & Alington, 1999; Pressley, 2002) and is a teacher-directed activity (DoE, 2008). It involves using carefully-selected books at the learners' instructional level. In group guided sessions, the learners can be grouped according to their reading abilities. The benefits are that it gives the teacher the opportunity to observe reading behaviours, identify areas of

need and allow learners to develop more independence and confidence as they practice and consolidate reading behaviours and skills. During the process, the role of the teacher is to bring learners to a higher level by demonstrating, modelling, explaining and encouraging learners during reading (Opitz & Ford, 2001).

The steps of the guided reading can be linked to the theory of Bruner's scaffolding process leading to independence. Teachers prepare ahead of time. Before reading starts, the teacher has to spend some time talking about comprehension strategies, introducing difficult words that are contained in the text and assisting individual learners to practice strategies for comprehending the text (Fountas & Pinnel, 2001). It provides opportunities for the teacher to integrate learners' growing knowledge of the conventions of print, letter-sound relationships and other foundational skills in context.

During guided reading, learners are exposed to reading aloud and shared reading. Simultaneously, the teacher is able to teach learners how to construct meaning from the text by using strategies to self-pace, self-direct and self-monitor under the teacher's guidance. This kind of support is linked to Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) view that learners learn more as they get support from knowledgeable others.

The South African government regards guided reading as the solution to the low level of literacy. However, according to a study on an evaluation of guided reading in three primary schools in the Western Cape, Kruizinga (2010) states that teachers had a superficial understanding of guided reading and that it was difficult for teachers to implement the steps for guided reading in their classrooms. However, the purpose of guided reading is to assist learners to become independent readers who can read the text for enjoyment and be able to get the meaning from the text.

### **2.5.5.3 Independent reading**

Independent reading is important in reading comprehension. During this activity, learners learn to apply the comprehension strategies independently that they were taught during guided reading (Biddulph, 2000).

According to the DoE (2008), independent reading is a purposeful planned activity. The teacher has a structured daily time during which learners associate themselves with books. Learners choose their own books according to their own interest and ability. However, learners should be guided to choose the texts that they can read with a high degree of success.

During this session, the teacher should listen, observe and gather information about learners' reading behaviour. Learners are able to listen to themselves as they read and cross-check while they practice the strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and Zimmerman (1998) support the view that learners learn best when they are responsible for their own learning.

The goal of teaching reading comprehension strategies is for the learners to become self-managed readers who can take over the process themselves. However, Taberski (2000) argued that during independent reading, frustrated learners do not sustain their reading long enough to practice the skill. This is because they are unable to decode the words and do not understand the text. Therefore, independent reading could become a meaningless exercise.

#### **2.5.5.4 Reading aloud**

Reading aloud is another approach that can have a positive effect on the development of reading comprehension (Lane & Wright, 2007). Read-aloud times should be a well-planned activity and not impromptu (Sipe, 2008). The teacher should be well-prepared, read to the whole class or to a small group, using material that is at the listening comprehension level of the learners (Teale, 2003). Reading aloud is regarded as the best motivator for instilling the desire to read in learners. In read-aloud sessions, the teacher reads to the whole class or to a small group using material that is at listening comprehension level of the learners.

The benefit of this approach to the learners is that it helps them to develop a love of literature, motivates them to read various kinds of texts on their own and increases their vocabulary (Lane & Wright, 2007). The speaking skills of the learners are enhanced by hearing good pronunciation and language use, as well as their

thinking skills through their comprehension of the text and experience with cause and effect including logical sequencing.

According to the DoE (2008), reading aloud should occur every day to stimulate learners' interest in the written text. Several key activities take place before, during and after reading. With regard to the teaching of reading comprehension, the DoE (2008) emphasised that teachers should keep a close check on learners to ensure that they are not barking at print, but reading with understanding. They must also be able to interpret what they read in various situations. Involving learners interactively while reading aloud help to improve comprehension. The after-reading discussions encourage learners to link the story events to their personal experiences (Sipe, 2008).

The teachers' handbook, *Teaching Reading in Early Grades*, briefly explains to the teacher how to develop comprehension, but does not explain how comprehension should be taught and which strategies to use before, during and after reading in a Home Language classroom. Therefore, there are no clear guidelines in the teachers' handbook about the teaching of reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners. Heugh (2005) concurs, stating that "while the teachers' handbook for teaching reading in English has been developed and widely distributed across South Africa schools, the DoE has still not published one handbook for teaching reading in any other African languages." Therefore, there is a need for guidelines to be developed to assist the African languages teachers in the languages they understand and with examples that they can use in their teaching.

## **2.6 The National Reading Strategy (NRS)**

The National Reading Strategy (NRS) was the third intervention strategy for promoting reading in South African primary schools (DoE, 2008). The vision of the NRS was that every South African learner would be a fluent reader who reads to learn and reads for enjoyment and achievement. The purpose of the NRS was to put reading firmly on the school agenda. It was meant to clarify and simplify curriculum expectations. Furthermore, it was meant to promote reading across the curriculum and to affirm and advance the use of all languages. This process will encourage reading for enjoyment and to ensure that not only teachers, learners and

parents, understand the role of improving and promoting reading but also the broader community.

However, according to the DoE (2008), there were many challenges with regard to the implementation of the NRS, namely teacher competency, a lack of libraries, teacher conditions, the print environment, language issues and inclusive education. In addition, the NRS states the following (DoE, 2008:8):

Many teachers in South Africa have an underdeveloped understanding of teaching literacy, reading and writing. Many teachers simply don't know how to teach reading. Too often teachers know only one method of teaching reading which may not suit the learning style of all learners.

Therefore, teachers are expected to be competent to teach reading comprehension and be able to create an atmosphere which is conducive for reading to the learners. Because teachers have not been explicitly trained to teach reading, it is difficult for them to assist learners.

## **2.7 Reading Comprehension in the Primary Grades**

Comprehension is the goal of reading and listening. We do it every day, often without being aware that we are doing it. However, the reader needs comprehension strategies in order to accomplish the task of reading most effectively, efficiently and meaningfully. Reading comprehension seems to be a complex process. Successful comprehension enables readers to acquire information, to experience and be aware of other worlds, to communicate successfully and to achieve academic success.

Comprehension strategies are very important in reading. They reflect a purposeful, intentional, on-going, and adaptable plan, procedure, or process to improve reading performance, because without it, learners have virtually no means to increase the sophistication of their reading (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007). According to Shanahan (2006:28), comprehension strategies are intentional actions that a reader can take to increase their chances of understanding or remembering the information in a text. Comprehension strategies are important in that they provide the reader with knowledge of how to use the strategies appropriately and understand the text



(NRP, 2000; Pressley *et al.*, 1998; Shanahan *et al.*, 2010). This implies that teaching reading comprehension is basic for comprehension.

As far as practical application is concerned, there are cognitive and metacognitive strategies. According to Flavell (1976:232), metacognition means awareness of one's thought processes in the act of carrying them out. The human being then uses this awareness to control him/herself. Metacognition makes the person aware of the way in which he/she is thinking. Good readers use metacognition strategies to think about and have control over their reading, for example, before reading, they might clarify their purpose for reading and preview the text. During reading, they might monitor their understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and fixing up any comprehension problems they have. After reading, they check their understanding of what they read (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton & Kucan, 2003).

Metacognitive strategies are higher-order executive tactics that entail planning for learning, monitoring, identifying and remedying causes of comprehension failure or evaluating the successes of a learning activity, that is, the strategies of self-planning, self-monitoring, self-regulating, self-questioning and self-reflecting (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1998). Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluating before, during and after any thinking act such as reading comprehension.

Cognitive strategies involve direct interaction with the text and contribute to facilitating comprehension, and operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009:284). Cognitive strategies include the strategies of underlining, using titles, using dictionary, writing down, guessing from the context, imagery, activating prior knowledge, summarising, using linguistic clues, using text markers, skipping the difficult parts and repeating phrases (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009:284). Good readers employ different cognitive and metacognitive strategies before, during and after reading a text. Given the complexity of comprehension, it seems likely that learners may fail to understand what they have read for a variety of reasons; hence, teaching reading is critical. Therefore, comprehension strategies are needed if one is to accomplish the task of teaching reading comprehension.

To understand written text, learners need to decode printed words and access their meanings. The question is whether teachers are doing enough to help learners to read, evaluate information and use it in their daily lives, and when the teaching of reading comprehension should begin. Should it begin when children are still very young, when they are older or even in the adolescent years? I believe that we must start in the early childhood years. In fact, teaching reading comprehension should be the goal of the primary grades. I believe that by the time learners are in Grade 3, they should be able to read the text and grasp its meaning, and be able to use the information in other situations in their lives. Zimmerman (1998) is of the opinion that learners at all levels are significantly influenced by the type of opportunities they are given. If they are given tasks that make them think, and thinking is mediated, they will do so, but if they are not given tasks in which they can practice any comprehension strategies then they will not do so. I believe that the earlier we start teaching learners comprehension strategies, the better.

The alternative, that is, not teaching comprehension strategies, would be to believe that comprehension and thought processes are a function area of heredity and are fixed when the child is born. Cognition is a function of both heredity and environment, and environmental factors can be manipulated to influence comprehension. In this regard, if comprehension strategies are really patterns of behaviour, then we might expect that practice would still have a positive effect on learners. Practice will lead to competence in intellectual functions, some of which will take place automatically in appropriate contexts. This does not mean that there is nothing more that affects the development of reading comprehension, but it means that practising strategies is the most important aspect.

Children adapt themselves to their environment through assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1950; 1953). As they do this, they learn to think and comprehend because they are striving to maintain a state of equilibrium between themselves and the environment. Although Piaget is not really trying to prove that comprehension can be taught, his theory seems to support it, because it implies that cognition can develop by interacting with the environment. This leads me to the assumption that if the environment is manipulated with the aim of improving the learner's thinking, then comprehension can be taught and learnt; and then comprehension strategies can be taught.

Relating to Piaget's theory, my insight is that teaching reading comprehension evolves through stages, meaning that there may be certain comprehension strategies that can be taught at Grade 3 and some that cannot, due to the maturational levels of these learners. However, cognitive psychologists have found that young children can perform cognitive tasks that were originally regarded as being too advanced for them and, therefore, can be taught comprehension strategies that were supposedly too advanced for them, for example, it has been found that children can understand cause and effect more than Piaget had given them credit for. Different authors on the subject concur that reading comprehension can be taught to Grade 3, as long as they are given suitable tasks and appropriate information and mediation (NRP, 2000).

## **2.8 Reading comprehension strategies that can be taught to Grade 3 learners**

Comprehension strategies are important in the lives of learners. Philips, Norris and Vavra (2007) and Kirby (2007) confirm that without them, learners have virtually no means of increasing the sophistication of reading. Teachers need to employ research-based strategies in the classroom because they have scientific evidence of success stories. Comprehension is not just something that just happens it needs to be taught. According to Shanahan (2006:31), drilling and repetition will not help in the teaching of reading comprehension. However, sound explanation of comprehension strategies and their importance is central.

It is thus believed that training teachers in how to teach reading comprehension remains an important aspect. Teachers need knowledge and skills to monitor learners' comprehension and teach learners comprehension strategies. That means before reading, the teacher carries the responsibility by providing a demonstration. According to Shanahan (2006:31), the demonstration must include a clear explanation of the strategy, a description of how and when to use it, and lastly an explanation of why it is useful. This relates to the theory of Vygotsky (1987), that for the child to develop to a stage where they can learn, they have to be in the company of a role model. The most important people in the context of this study are the teachers. If they do not serve as positive role models, the learner will never develop and become able to read and understand the text. During shared reading,

group guided reading, independent reading and reading aloud, the teacher must use various strategies for example summarising, story structure to teach reading comprehension.

From the discussions above, there seems to be a wealth of research evidence showing that reading comprehension can be improved by teaching learners comprehension strategies. According to Lenz (2005:2) and Armbruster *et al.*, (2003:45-57), it would be appropriate and easier for teachers to follow the three ways of organising comprehension strategies and to think about strategies that one might use, before reading (phase 1), during reading (phase 2) and after reading (phase 3). This is because reading comprehension is a process, and as such, it has various stages at which different tasks need to be performed.

The purpose of the before-reading strategies is to activate prior knowledge for text comprehension. Before reading, learners learn new information by connecting it to what they already know about a topic and the structure of a text (Pressley *et al.*, 1998).

During reading comprehension, learners read books and stories from the past, and use language to write their own bibliography. Learners should be able to read with understanding, and where difficulties occur, be able to initiate repair strategies if comprehension breakdown is detected. During reading comprehension, learners read nonfiction stories, big books with various topics in, for example, nature, explaining simple facts, simple weather forecasts, and stories about the sun and moon. Learners activate prior knowledge, make connections among important ideas, construct and test hypotheses, paraphrase key points, and try to resolve any comprehension difficulties that may arise (Pressley *et al.*, 1997).

After-reading helps learners to clarify any unclear meaning and where learners maybe required answering questions in writing – either comprehension questions at the end of a chapter or questions handed out by the teacher.

In this study, I employed the view that reading comprehension is a cognitive process that involves a deliberate, strategic problem-solving action of the reader as he or she engages with a text. In this process, readers use their prior knowledge,

reading comprehension strategies, knowledge of language and print, experience and perceived purpose of reading. From the theoretical point of view, if the knowledgeable teacher actively involves learners, the teaching of reading comprehension can increase the chances of understanding or remembering the information in a text. The teacher's knowledge of teaching comprehension strategies and willingness, and the classroom learning environment may influence the way the learner views the text. In the context of the study, it implies that the teacher should be able to teach strategies as a way to help the learners to comprehend the text. Learners come from home into contact with the teacher who is required to teach learners how to construct meaning from the text by using the strategies for before, during and after reading. My argument is that the teachers' use of reading comprehension strategies may influence reading comprehension positively.

According to Noles and Dole (2004:179), the teaching of strategies empowers readers, particularly those who struggle, by giving them the tools they need to construct meaning from text. They further explain that instead of blaming comprehension problems on learners' own innate abilities for which they (learners) see no solution, explicit strategy instruction teaches learners to take control of their own learning and comprehension. Loranger (1997:31) found that learners who were trained in the use of strategies showed greater focus of engagement during reading groups, improved knowledge use of strategies, and improved achievement in comprehension (Zimmerman,1998).

In the same vein, Dreyer (1998:23) used the reading comprehension strategies to train learners in reading comprehension in her study, and the results showed that instruction in reading comprehension strategies can and do make a very important contribution in improving the reading comprehension of learners. These research studies demonstrate that reading comprehension strategies can be taught and that they can contribute to improve learners' reading comprehension abilities.

In America, because of the low level of reading comprehension amongst the learners, the NRP (2000) examined research studies that focused on learners in K-12(Grades R-12) and concluded that there was sufficient evidence supporting the teaching of seven comprehension strategies. These strategies are comprehension

monitoring, graphic and semantic organisers, question answering, question generating, story structure, summarising and multiple strategies.

Within the context of my research project based on the low performance of Grade 3 learners, in particular Tshivenda-speaking learners, there is a need for the teachers to teach comprehension strategies to help learners to read with understanding. My argument is that these strategies, if used in a Tshivenda classroom, may help teachers to teach the learners how to unlock the code of written text with ease. In the following section, I present the primary reading comprehension strategies based on research evidence as identified by the NRP (2000). These comprehension strategies are relevant as they can be used within the context of my study. If applied correctly, they may be effective in teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners.

### **2.8.1 Comprehension monitoring**

The teaching and monitoring of comprehension strategies are important to assist the reader to become aware of and realised that when they read they understand what they are reading. This refers to learners' knowledge about and use of reading comprehension strategies, and is a form of metacognition. Routman (2000:134) defines comprehension monitoring as "a metacognitive process which is affected by person strategy and task variables." Routman (2000:134) adds to this by stating that comprehensive monitoring is essential for reading as it directs the reader when trying to make sense of a text. Good readers use metacognitive strategies to think about and have control over their reading, for example, before reading, they might monitor their understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and 'fix-up' any comprehension problems they have. After reading, they check their understanding of what they read. Examples of fix-up strategies are identifying where in the text the difficulty occurs, restarting a difficult sentence or passage on their own and looking back (or forward) through the text (Lehr & Osborn, 2005:18).

According to Lehr and Osborn (2000:18) readers learn how to be aware of understanding their material during comprehension monitoring (NRP, 2000:15). Lehr and Osborn (2003) regard the reader's thinking as important during the comprehension processes. Specifically, it teaches learners to notice when they

understand, to identify what they do not understand, and to use appropriate fix-up strategies to resolve the problems when they do not understand something they read (NRP, 2000; Armbruster *et al.*, 2003; Lehr & Osborn, 2005). This implies that when learners monitor their comprehension, they understand that reading must make sense; and when it does not they try to use appropriate different fix-up strategies to resolve the problems. The goal is to develop awareness by readers of the cognitive process involved during reading and teaches learners to be aware of what they do understand. The NRP (2000) suggested that monitoring comprehension strategies could help learners to become more aware of their difficulties during reading comprehension.

In teaching comprehension monitoring strategies, the teacher needs to demonstrate awareness of difficulties of understanding words, phrases, clauses or sentences. Learners are taught to think about what is hampering their understanding. They think aloud, reread, slow down, and look back in text to try to solve a problem (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:6-7).

Context clues are also an important part of comprehension monitoring. Learners can use this strategy during reading when they encounter an unfamiliar word in text, for example, when a learner stumbles on an unfamiliar word, she/he needs to know how to use all word identification tools in their mental toolbox to decode the word. Learners look to see if they recognise any part of the word and then say the beginning sound of the familiar part of the word, and then read the rest of the sentence. If learners cannot say the correct word, then the teacher asks them to think what would make sense there, reminding the learners to use all clues.

## **2.8.2 Graphic and semantic organisers**

Another comprehension strategy that is important to reading comprehension is the used of graphic and semantic organisers. These tools enable learners to examine and visually represent relationships and help learners write well-organised summaries. These organisers illustrate concepts and interrelationships among concepts of text, using diagrams or other pictorial devices (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:50).Graphic and semantic organisers are found in many forms, for example, semantic maps, expository maps, story maps and graphic metaphors. These allow

the reader to represent graphically/visually the meanings and relationships of concepts and their relationships with other concepts (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003; Lehr & Osborn, 2005). Lehr and Osborn (2005:19) expand the description by saying that graphic and semantic organisers allow the reader to represent graphically/visually the meanings and relationships of the ideas that underlie the words in the text and to improve a reader's memory of what they read. By using the strategy of graphic and semantic organisers, readers focus on concepts and how they are related to other concepts. In teaching the use of graphic and semantic organisers, the teacher must ask learners to construct an image that represents the content.

### **2.8.3 Questioning**

The strategy of asking and answering questions seems to have been used for many years and is still used by teachers to guide and monitor learners' learning. Questions appear to be effective for improving learners' reading comprehension. They provide learners with a purpose for reading, helps learners to focus attention on what they are to learn, help learners to think actively as they read, encourage learners to monitor their comprehension, and help learners to review content and relate what they have learnt to what they already know.

In her study, Durkin (1978) criticise the asking and answering questions as a reading comprehension strategy. She points out that the manner in which teachers ask questions is more of an assessment of comprehension rather than teaching of the reading comprehension process, and regards it as 'interrogation'. However, it is important for teachers to ask various questions to develop learners' critical thinking. Bloom (1986) and Joubert *et al.*, (2008) agree that the type of questions learners become accustomed to can shape their understanding of the text, for example, when learners are constantly asked literal questions, they will obviously focus on these during reading comprehension. Routman (1996:137) maintains that teachers need to ask higher-order questions and show learners how to find answers, and this requires interactive settings in order to achieve high levels of reading comprehension. The teacher's questioning strongly supports and advances learners' learning from reading, keeps the learners engaged and enhances understanding (Feldman, 2003).



Analysis by Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003) on questioning as a strategy indicates that “questions lead readers deeper into a piece, setting up dialogue with the author, sparking in readers’ minds what they care about. If you ask questions as you read, you are awake, you are interacting with words” (Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003:73).

This implies that questioning during reading becomes a strategy to help learners to learn to interact with the author of the text and so remain focused throughout the text. Teachers must ask a combination of questions and show learners how to find answers. This can be done by discussing the different types of questions that exist with the learners (Raphael & Au, 2005) and using the information to locate the answer.

In order to succeed, Taylor, Pearson, Peterson and Rodriguez (2002) and Bloom (1968) found that learners must engage in high levels of questioning and do so in highly interactive settings to achieve high levels of comprehension. In a way, it is critical that instruction should help learners understand that active readers question the author, the text, and themselves before, during and after reading.

Raphael and Au (2005) maintain that in order for learners to be able to answer higher-order questions, they need to be able to understand the relationship between the question and the answer. Under questioning as a comprehension strategy, there are two different strategies, namely question answering and question generating.

### **2.8.3.1 Question answering**

During reading comprehension, the teacher expects the learner to read and understand the text and answer questions, and to use the information when needed. The teaching of the question-answering strategy is helpful for the learners as they become aware of what is important in the text and learn to answer the questions.

During question answering, the reader answers questions posed by the teacher and is given feedback for correctness. It gives learners a purpose for reading, focuses attention on what they are to learn, encourages them to monitor and helps them to

review content and relate what they have learnt to what they already know. Learners learn to distinguish questions that can be answered based on the text from those based on prior knowledge. They are encouraged to learn to answer questions better and therefore acquire more knowledge (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:49-53). There are different types of questions, for example, answering instructions, which simply teaches learners to re-examine the text to find answers to questions that they could not answer after the initial reading. Another type of questions help learners understand the relationship between questions and where the answers to those questions are found. In this instruction, readers learn to answer questions that require an understanding of information.

Questioning during the guided reading phase is intended to scaffold learning for learners and to check learners' understanding. Such questioning is meant to instruct, guide learners along the pathway to independence (Dewitz, 2006).

When teaching the question answering strategy, teachers need to ask learners questions during and after reading passages of text. Teachers ask learners to look back. Within the context of this study, 'looking back' is when learners articulate and process their understanding of what they have read and to find answers after reading. Teachers ask learners to analyse questions with respect to whether the question is tapping literal information covered in the text, information that can be inferred by combining information in the text, or information in the reader's prior knowledge base (NRP, 2000).

Concerning the type of questions to be asked, Joubert *et al.*, (2008) recommend Bloom's and other taxonomies as useful tools for helping teachers to engage learners in higher-order thinking when they read. We can also relate this higher-order thinking with the applied model of self-regulation of Zimmerman (1998). Teachers must identify each learner's abilities and match their profile to a variety of reading comprehension strategies rather than teach in a rigid manner. If learners apply higher-order thinking, they are able to draw more meaning from what they learn and apply the learning in more sophisticated ways. Although thinking skills alone do not make a learner an effective reader, they are essential for reading comprehension.

### 2.8.3.2 Question generation

Teachers expect learners to become independent and lifelong readers. Readers who attain this learn to ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story (NRP, 2000; Lehr & Osborn, 2005).

Question generating encourages the learner to be actively involved and learn to own the reading text, and thus improves comprehension ability (Routman, 1994:139). In their view, Lehr and Osborn (2005) confirm that teaching learners to ask their own questions improves their active processing of text and improves their comprehension. By generating questions, learners become aware of whether they can answer the questions and if they understand what they are reading. Learners learn to ask themselves questions that require them to integrate information from different segments of text, for example, learners can be taught to ask main idea questions that relate to important information in a text. Question generating teaches learners to become involved in the text, independently. They learn to become active readers and self-questioners and to become aware of whether they understand the text or not. As a result, their overall comprehension improves (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

In teaching the question-generating strategy, teachers need to ask learners to generate questions while reading a passage. The question should integrate information across different parts of the passage. Teachers ask learners to evaluate their questions, checking that they covered important material, were integrative, and whether they could be answered based on what was in the text. Teachers provide feedback on the quality of the questions asked or assist learners in answering the question generated (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:11).

Question generating also assist learners to increase their awareness of whether they are comprehending text (NRP, 2000; Armbruster *et al.*, 2003). Questioning can be applied before, during and after reading. Pearson (1984:727) suggests that during reading comprehension, teachers should make sure that guided reading questions (asked either during or after stories) include many inference questions to enhance both story-specific inferential comprehension and comprehension of new stories. Secondly, adding a pre reading set for evoking relevant prior knowledge

and predicting what will happen in a story, coupled with discussion of why it is important to do so, results in even better inferential comprehension and even helps literal questions.

#### **2.8.4 Story structure**

During reading comprehension, the reader continuously asks questions in order to understand the text. Teaching learners to look at the story structure is important in reading comprehension.

According Lehr and Osborn (2005:18), the story structure is “the way the content and events of a story are organised into a plot.” This is where readers ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story (NRP, 2000). In the same vein, Lehr and Osborn (2005:18) state that learners who can recognise the story structure have greater appreciation and understanding of and a memory for stories. These strategies train learners to learn to ask themselves question during reading about the basic components of stories as they read. Learners learn to identify the categories of content, namely, setting, initiating events, internal reactions, goal attempts and outcomes and how this content is organised into a plot (Lehr &Osborn, 2005:18). This implies that during teaching reading comprehension, teachers need to ask and answer five questions: Who is the main character? Where and when did the story occur? What did the main character do? How did the story end? How did the main character feel? This will help learners to learn to understand about, that is, the, who and what, where, when and why of stories. They learn to identify what happened and what was done in the story, for example, learners should recognise the story structure through the use of story maps. They also learn to identify the main character of the story, where and when the story took place, what the main character did, how the story ended, and how the main characters felt. Learners learn to construct a story map recording the setting, problem, goal, action and outcome over time (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:11-12). A type of graphic organiser shows the sequence of events in simple stories. Instruction in the content and organisation of stories improve learners’ comprehension and memory of stories.

### 2.8.5 Summarising

Another strategy that can be used in teaching reading comprehension is summarising. This requires learners to determine what is important in what they are reading, to condense information and to put it into their own words (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:53). This implies that during reading comprehension, teachers must teach learners to read the text and synthesise the information. Routman (2000:140) refers to summarising as the ability to state the main ideas in a text in a clear and coherent manner. This involves paraphrasing and reorganising text information. It requires readers to sift through large units of text, differentiating important from unimportant ideas, and the significant from the insignificant (Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:13) and then synthesise those ideas and create a new coherent text that stands for, by substantive criteria, the original (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1999:244). In the same vein, Klinger and Vaughn (1999) and the NRP (2000) maintain that summarisation can be taught effectively and that the ability to summarise can improve comprehension recall.

According to the NRP (2000), during summarising learners are taught to integrate ideas and generalise from the text information. Summarising involves identifying the main idea in a paragraph or composing a concise statement of the main concepts from a long passage; this helps learners to focus on the main ideas or and encourage learners to reread as they construct a summary (Kamil, 2004). Summarising requires learners to determine what is important in what they are reading, to condense this information, and to put it into their own words (Lehr & Osborn, 2005). In so doing, learners identify or generate main ideas, connect the main or central ideas, and remember what they read. They learn to make connections among main ideas through the text. However, “summarising sounds difficult and the research demonstrates that, in fact, it is a difficult task” (Dole *et al.*, 1999:244).

Teachers therefore need to give learners opportunities to practice the summarising strategy before they apply it. Summarising will enable learners to process the text more deeply and better retain their knowledge of the text. In teaching summarising as a strategy, teachers need to teach learners to summarise main ideas and leave out the less important aspects.

## 2.9 Conclusion

Reading comprehension is a challenge worldwide. However, there is agreement that teaching reading comprehension can enhance learners' understanding of texts. There are research-based comprehension strategies which the teacher must know and model during reading. Teachers must monitor learners' understanding and ensure that they use the strategies correctly. The literature revealed that South Africa still lacks the theoretical base to guide teachers on the subject and that more research on the subject is needed.

In this chapter, I gave an overview of the international and national contexts of the teaching of reading comprehension. I briefly discussed various strategies and their importance in teaching reading comprehension. It is evident that reading comprehension is a process. Teachers should organise their comprehension teaching in the three phases of reading lesson namely before, during and after reading as discussed in this chapter, to help learners understand the importance and the correct use of strategies. It is clear that before teaching comprehension, teachers must first examine the text for rigour, level of questioning and vocabulary. During reading, teachers must deepen the learners' level of understanding by modelling the reading text. They must provide multiple opportunities for the learners to read and interact with the text. I explained that it is important during reading to deepen learners understanding by asking them open-ended questions at various levels and not only yes and no questions. Teachers must teach learners to read the text and be able to generate questions from the text.

Teachers must monitor learners' understanding and ensure that learners use the strategies correctly. After teaching, teachers must be able to reflect on learners' responses to instruction and plan for deeper teaching opportunities. It is clear that reading comprehension teaching needs a strategic teacher who is competent and knowledgeable, for example, the teacher must know that before reading he/she must teach learners to learn to set a purpose for reading, provide questions and connections to motivate learners to be involved in their own learning. In addition, the teacher must pre-teach key vocabulary concepts, link learners' background knowledge and experiences relate the text to learners' lives and teach learners text features and how to use them. The same strategies may be used during and after

reading, for example, the teacher must teach learners how to monitor understanding through demonstration and think aloud, provide questions to consider while reading, help them draw inferences from text, ask them to summarise the main ideas of a paragraph and to confirm, disconfirm, or extend predictions and generated questions.

Teachers have a pivotal role in helping learners to acquire these skills and preparing them for independent learning. Capacity building for teachers is therefore needed, with appropriate guidelines on how to teach reading comprehension. It is clear that comprehension is a problem-solving process. That is why it is critical for teachers to have a substantial knowledge of the strategies and how best to teach and help learners to acquire and use strategies appropriately. Indeed, teachers need to respond to the individual learners' needs and provide various reading experiences to foster their ability to use strategies correctly and progress to self-regulatory learning.

The literature review revealed that the best time to lay a strong foundation is to teach reading comprehension strategies from an early age when children start school, instead of attempting to teach them later in their school years when the harm has already been done.