

CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

‘A student’s academic progress is profoundly shaped by the ability to understand what is read. Students, who cannot understand what they read, are not likely to acquire the skills necessary to participate in the 21st century workforce’
(Butler, Urrutia, Buenger & Hunt, 2010:1)

1.1 Introduction

A child’s success at school and throughout life depends largely on the ability to read and understand the texts. Teachers, especially those teaching in the Foundation Phase, have the profound challenge of making reading a reality for all learners.

Reading skills acquisition is the process of acquiring the basic skills necessary for learning to read, that is, “the ability to acquire meaning from print” (Verhoeven, 2000). The reading acquisition skills required for proficient reading fluency, the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and vocal expression. The ability to read fluently is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension. If a reader is not fluent, it may be difficult to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge (Verhoeven, 2000). This accuracy and automaticity of reading serves as a bridge between decoding and comprehension vocabulary. A critical aspect of reading comprehension is vocabulary development. When a reader encounters an unfamiliar word in print and decodes it to derive its spoken pronunciation, the reader understands the word if it is in the readers spoken vocabulary.

This study focused on the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners at the General Education and Training (GET) level in South African primary schools. These classes are studying Tshivenda as a home language (Home Language or First Language) in the Foundation Phase. The research is presented as a case study of three schools in a rural district, namely, Vhembe, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

The focus for the study was selected for two reasons:

- Reading comprehension has been identified as a major weakness of South African learners. Recent surveys have indicated that the problem is ongoing (PIRLS, 2007; ANA, 2011). It is critical therefore, that research is carried out to establish possible reasons for this situation in South African schools.
- Reading in their mother tongue is a critical skill for learners and this can assist them to understand other languages, since the majority of these school learners, especially in areas like Vhembe, use Tshivenda as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). They need to be able to read and understand texts in order to pursue knowledge in a wide range of texts outside of the classrooms.

There are a number of ways in which reading can be researched. A number of international and South African studies (see Ch. 2) have focused on measuring learner performance to read in Home Language (L1) and First Additional Language (L2). Others have measured the effects of interventions carried out to improve reading skills (Williams, 2007).

This study did not attempt to measure performance. A qualitative case study investigated the teaching of reading comprehension that may be affecting the teaching of reading comprehension amongst Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. While the focus was on Grade 3 learners, the study may well be relevant in some ways to intermediate learners. It investigates the classroom practices of Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking teachers when teaching reading comprehension in reading lessons. It did so in order to find out how teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. For learning to become more effective, learners have to be exposed to more reading in the language of learning and teaching. The teaching of reading comprehension exposes learners to read various texts to assist them in gathering more information and provides them with skills to read for various purposes. It also assists them to acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes in the learning of the language (NCS, 2002). The language of learning becomes crucial in the learning and teaching process.

This study focused on literature and the empirical research. The empirical study was divided into teachers' individual interviews, focus group interviews and

classroom observations. It is for the above reasons that I was prompted to conduct this study.

1.2 Rationale

International and local studies (The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006;SAQMEC,2004; The Times, June29, 2011) show beyond any shadow of doubt that South African learners' reading literacy performance falls far below the required standard. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006) describes trends of reading achievement. The study provides international comparisons for the reading achievement of Grade 4 learners, their 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, as well as curriculum and classroom approaches to reading instruction.

PIRLS (2006) measure learner performance in literacy at Grades 4 and 6. The findings reveal the low level of reading literacy in both grades in South Africa. PIRLS (2006) focuses on three aspects of reading literacy, namely processes of comprehension, purposes of reading, and reading behaviours and attitudes. The study confirms that more than half of the learners who speak English and Afrikaans, and over 80% of African-language speakers in South Africa do not even reach the lowest international benchmark. This means that there are a high number of learners without basic reading skills and strategies for coping with academic tasks. The Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, 2004) revealed that children in Grades 1 to 6 are reading two grade levels below their own in English and their mother tongue.

South Africa participated in PIRLS between 2004 and 2007. Learner assessment occurred in all 11 official languages, including Tshivenda. The study assessed learners who had just completed Foundation Phase schooling. This means that the Grade 4 results were a true reflection of the Foundation Phase learning experiences of the learners. In an analysis per language, the study revealed that Tshivenda learners also fall below the international mean in reading literacy (PIRLS, 2006:27).

It is therefore clear that there is a serious problem among Tshivenda learners regarding reading literacy.

In view of this state of literacy, the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE) conducted a study in Grade 1-4 on literacy in 2008, as most of Tshivenda speakers are living in the Limpopo Province. The aim of the study was to improve the quality of literacy teaching in the province. When the study commenced, I used the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). In the meantime, the new Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) came into effect. I refer to it in the final chapter of this study. The study revealed that the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) of the Department of Education (2002) emphasises the importance of teaching reading literacy. However, the curriculum document does not explain the mechanics of literacy teaching which teachers are expected to apply (Reeves, Heugh, Prinsloo, MacDonald, Netshitangani, Alidou, Diederick & Herbst, 2008:xx).

Concerning mother tongue teaching and literacy skills, a study on evaluation of literacy teaching in primary schools of Limpopo Province identified the following (Reeves *et al.*, 2008:xxvii-xxx):

- Learners' poor academic achievement from Grade 4 onwards cannot be attributed to learning in English only, but also to ineffective mother-tongue literacy and language teaching practices in schools and classrooms from Grade R onwards.
- Teachers are uncertain about how to approach the teaching of reading and writing and what strategies to use for teaching literacy.
- There is insufficient evidence of teachers directly and explicitly developing learners' literacy skills.
- Most learners in the Foundation Phase are not receiving adequate opportunities to develop strong literacy either in the mother tongue or in English.
- Learners are not doing enough writing and reading in the home language or the first additional language.
- Learners are not provided with sufficient opportunities to practise reading extended narrative or expository text aloud through individual guided

practice, and to construct their own sentences and/or produce their own extended text.

- There is a lack of books and a reading culture in schools and classrooms, and limited opportunities for learners to handle and read a range of books exist.
- Teachers are not keeping track closely enough of each learner's reading and writing ability and progress to have comprehensive knowledge of individual differences. Most teachers do not have reading and writing assessment records that provide on-going, constructive and useful information and notes specific to the status of individual learners' literacy skills.
- Most teachers said they had received little or no specialised practical training on how to teach reading and writing in classrooms from the Limpopo Department of Education.
- Learners are not doing enough writing and reading in the home language or first additional language (the first language is the home language and the first additional language is any language taught other than the learners' home language).

The study on evaluation of literacy teaching in primary schools of Limpopo Province revealed that there is a need for the LDoE to support Foundation Phase teachers with literacy development in the home language and the first additional language (FAL). This literacy development includes the teaching of reading comprehension.

Despite the recommended changes to Curriculum 2005 (DoE, C2005) to develop an improved curriculum for the 21st century, South Africa still faces reading literacy problems at the Foundation Phase (DoE, 2008; ANA, 2011). Concerns about learners' development of basic literacy skills at the foundational levels of education (Bloch, 1999; Lessing & De Witt, 2005) are consistently reflected in local and international research (Howie & Van Staden, 2007; Fleisch, 2008; SAQMEC, 2004; Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Scherman & Archer, 2006).

In 2000, a Sunday Times headline proclaimed that South African children were the 'dunces of Africa' (16 July 2000:1). The article reported the findings of a comparative study of literacy and numeracy rates of primary school children from 12 countries in Africa, with South African children faring poorly in comparison with their

African peers on both literacy and numeracy measures (Pretorius, 2000; Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005). This was further supported by the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, who pointed out that many schools in South Africa were experiencing reading problems, especially in the Foundation Phase (DoE, 2008). The minister referred to the data obtained from the PIRLS (2006) as shocking. She pointed out that the grade-by-grade reading strategy for the development of reading literacy skills was being implemented at a very slow pace.

As education is a major concern of this study, some aspects of teaching reading are highlighted here. The Department of Education (DoE, 2008:8) explains that many teachers in South Africa have an underdeveloped understanding of teaching literacy, reading and writing. Many teachers simply do not 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. Teachers do not know how to stimulate reading, inside and outside the classroom. Although much has been said about improving teaching and learning in South African schools, Jansen (2002) argues that to make a real difference, a teacher's knowledge base has to be expanded, textbooks have to be distributed equally and instruction has to be better utilised. In their study, Howie *et al.*, (2006:48) point out those teachers were not able to implement strategies they have gleaned from professional training to the most effective level.

Pandor (2007) reiterated that the speakers of African languages had low average scores in the 2001 and 2007 surveys. The average literacy score for Tshivenda-speaking learners was 26%. This further illustrates the educational crisis in South African education. The 2001 audit by the South African Department of Education (DoE) to assess literacy levels across all nine provinces showed that only 38% of Grade 3 learners could read at that grade level in their mother tongue. The minister ascribed this problem to teacher quality and ability, lack of sufficient support for African language learners, large class sizes, lack of resources and lack of quality leadership in schools. Additionally, in his state of the nation address, South Africa's President, Jacob Zuma (2010), said that classroom instruction has to change to address the low level of reading literacy of learners (www://blogs.timeslive.co.za/Hartley/2010/02/11).

The above is an indication that the state of reading literacy among Foundation Phase learners needs urgent attention. It indicates that South Africa is indeed lagging behind in terms of introducing reading literacy skills to learners, even though the importance of literacy is explicitly highlighted in the National Curriculum Statement (DoE, 2002).

The academic rationale of this study, which evolved from my personal interest and a survey of the literature (such as, Pretorius, 2000; PIRLS, 2006; DoE, 2008; Ramphela, 2009) was to investigate, by means of interviews and observations, the teaching of reading in the classroom, as there is evidence that teachers are not able to teach reading comprehension effectively (DoE, 2008). A further motivation for this study was sparked when I joined the University of Venda and took up a lectureship in the Bachelor of Education Foundation Phase (BEdTEF) programme and National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE). During school visits and when providing support for BEdTEF and NPDE students, it concerned me deeply to find that many learners in the Foundation Phase lacked basic reading comprehension skills. As a lecturer for the Foundation Phase, I decided to explore the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. I decided to approach the topic from the perspective of teachers' use of reading comprehension strategies before, during and after reading. I furthermore approached the study by looking at how the strategies influence teachers' classroom instruction when teaching reading comprehension. Against this background, I decided that my study should focus on the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners.

1.3 Research questions and sub-questions

Collected data to answer this research project was aimed at documenting the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The study used an interpretive paradigm to understand which strategies teachers employ in teaching reading comprehension. The study was framed by the following main research question:

How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?

The sub questions that assisted me in answering the main question were:

- a) How do teachers understand reading comprehension?
- b) What do teachers regard as important when teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?
- c) Which strategies do teachers use when teaching reading comprehension?
- d) What strategies can teachers use to improve reading comprehension?

These research questions guided me throughout the study. The data generated by these questions were instrumental in understanding the processes and strategies that the teachers use in teaching reading comprehension.

1.4 Explanation of core elements in the study

This section clarifies the key concepts of the research topic and my interpretation thereof for application in this study. These concepts are the teaching of reading comprehension, reading comprehension strategies, mother tongue (Tshivenda), first additional language to Foundation Phase and Grade 3 learners.

1.4.1 Teaching

Teaching is one of the means by which education is achieved. Teaching is an activity that aims at presenting specific learning content to somebody in such a way that those persons learn something from it. Learning, on the other hand, is an activity in which the person being taught actively benefits from teaching and absorbs a particular content. These activities result in teaching-learning events during which the processes of teaching learning are linked (Fraser, 1990:30).

According to Carr (1996), teaching is also characterisable as an intentional activity. It is undertaken with the purpose of bringing about learning, which is why we can barely grasp what it is to teach in advance and what it is to learn. I believe the purpose of teaching is not to teach learners how to memorise facts, or to know all the answers, but to get learners to understand the text. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of how to apply reading comprehension strategies effectively.

For the purposes of this study, teaching is defined as skills and/or knowledge that a teacher needs to employ the most effective reading comprehension strategies to enable learners to read the text with understanding.

1.4.2 Reading comprehension

In recent years, efforts to recognise the complexity of comprehension have resulted in expanded definitions, such as the definition used by the RAND Reading Study Group (2002), a group charged by the United States Department of Education with developing a research agenda to address pressing issues in literacy. To guide its work, RAND (2002) defines comprehension as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.” It consists of three elements, namely, the reader, the text, and the activity or the purpose of reading (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002:11). According to this definition, the three elements are interrelated and shaped by the larger social and cultural context in which the reading occurs. Reader, then, refers to the actual person who performs the action of reading, either to themselves or to others.

The National Assessment Governing Board (NAEP, 2004) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin & Sainsbury, 2001:3) have developed similar definitions of comprehension as a process that requires the coordination and interaction of multiple factors. Based on these definitions, reading comprehension is a multi-dimensional process that involves factors related to the reader, the text and the activity.

Reading comprehension thus has several definitions and it has been found that it involves more than 30 cognitive and metacognitive processes (Block & Pressley, 2002). Comprehension can then be defined as a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with the text through a combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text (Pardo, 2004:272; Antunez, 2002:5; Sweet & Snow, 2003:1; Klingner, Vaughn & Boardman, 2007; Brand-Gruwel, Aarnoutse & Van der Boss, 1998:65; Roe, Stoodt-Hill & Burns, 2004; Roe, Smith & Burns, 2005; NRP, 2000).

According to Pardo (2004), Duke (2003) added two concepts to the definition of comprehension, namely navigation and critique, because she believed that readers move through the text during the reading process, finding their way and evaluating the accuracy of the text to see if it fits the teacher's personal agenda.

Harris and Hodges (1995:39), McLaughlin and Allen (2002), and Pearson (2001) state that reading comprehension is the acquiring of meaning from written text, with text being defined as a range of material from traditional books. In this meaning-making process, the reader interacts with the print and is involved in making sense of the message. Readers comprehend text by acquiring meaning, confirming meaning and creating meaning. This implies that the reader uses different strategies in order to understand the text.

Shanahan (2006:28) regards reading comprehension as the "act of understanding and interpreting the information within a text." This means that reading comprehension involves word knowledge, as well as thinking and reasoning. In order for comprehension to take place, words must be decoded and associated with their meanings in a reader's memory. Phrases and sentences must be processed fluently so that the meaning is derived from one word and the phrase or sentences are not lost before the text is processed (Nel, Dreyer & Kopper, 2004). Sweet and Snow (2003) suggest that the reader must monitor this construction process, solving strategy problems and making repairs as needed. It is therefore critical that learners should have an idea of what they are reading and monitor themselves to check their comprehension during the reading process.

Brand-Gruwel, Aarnoutes and Van der Boss (1998:65) state that "reading comprehension is a highly complex process which operates on decoded language at various linguistic levels." This indicates that reading comprehension is a process which needs to be taught and learnt. Reading and understanding what is read is critical. When the reader engages in reading, he or she is constructing meaning in relation to his or her prior knowledge. When one engages with any information the context within which one does this is based on what one knows and how one relates to one's knowledge (National Reading Panel–NRP, 2000). Teachers should,

therefore, take note of learners' prior strategy knowledge when teaching reading comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Readers construct meaning, that is, they use their reading abilities and their knowledge of the world to create their interpretative frameworks and comprehend text leading to constructivist reading theories. It is therefore critically appropriate for teachers to understand how comprehension works, for example, Durkin (1993) defines comprehension as "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader." This implies that reading comprehension is a problem solving process that requires the reader to be actively involved.

However, definitions do not adequately capture the complexity of reading comprehension. How well a reader is able to construct a meaning from a text is influenced by many factors. These are factors such as the nature of the reading activity, the abilities and skills the reader brings to the activity, the nature of the text being read, its genre, its subject matter, the density and quality of its writing and the social and cultural factors that make up the context of the reading (NRP, 2000; Pardo, 2004).

Without comprehension, reading words is reduced to mimicking the sounds of language. This is because the main reason for reading is to comprehend the text and use the information in different situations. Yet, Bos and Vaughn (1994), as well as Durkin (1993), maintain that reading comprehension is often called the "essence of reading." It is of vital importance that learners must understand what they read.

Within the context of the study reading comprehension is understood as the ability to read any text with understanding, and where difficulties occur, learners must use comprehension strategies.

1.4.3 Reading comprehension strategies

Researchers have found that the use of strategies during reading comprehension can help the reader to understand the text (NRP, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000; Williams, 2007; Crawford & Torgesen, 2006; Adler, 2004; Gibson, 2004).

Reading comprehension strategies provide a language around comprehension processes. It gives readers a vehicle for expressing their thinking and monitoring their thoughts as they are reading the text. “A strategy is a plan; you are to be thoughtful when you do it, and often adjust the plan as you go along to fit the situation. Therefore, good readers use many strategies,” for example, predictions, question generating and question answering (Duffy, 2002; 2003; Duffy & McIntyre, 1982). This enables them to independently understand, discuss the text and to relate it to other situations. Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris (2008:368), as well as Pereira-Laird and Deane (1997), define reading comprehension strategies as specific, deliberate mental processes or behaviours, which control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode a text, understand words and construct the meaning of a text. According to Anderson (1991), what is important is that readers should know what strategies there are, and how and when to use them. In addition, the reader must also know how to apply the strategy successfully in different contexts.

Reading comprehension strategies, then, are “conscious plans – sets or a set of steps, e.g., making connections, creating mental images (visualising) or questioning that good readers use to make sense of text; and help(s) learners become purposeful, active readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension” for example, self-monitoring (Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2003:49).

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2002), comprehension strategies are procedures that guide students (learners) as they attempt to read and write. In the same vein, Trabasso and Bouchard (2002:177) maintain that comprehension strategies are specific, learned procedures that foster active, competent, self-regulated and intentional reading. It is therefore of the utmost importance that teachers must encourage learners to use strategies independently throughout their reading activities. Schumm (2006:229) added by saying that reading comprehension strategies are processes that are controlled by the reader, are metacognitive, are intentional, are flexible, and emphasise reasoning. This means that, during reading comprehension, teachers must teach learners a combination of strategies and to use them flexibly in order to become strategic readers.

Mayer (2003:34) regards reading comprehension strategies as “techniques for improving students (learners) success in extracting useful knowledge from text.” This means that teaching learners’ comprehension strategies may enhance the learners’ understanding.

For the purpose of this study, reading comprehension strategies are useful tips teachers plan and teach learners to use when reading a text to ensure understanding when reading the text.

1.4.3.1 Metacognitive strategies and cognitive strategies

There is empirical evidence (NRP, 2000; Singhal, 2001; Mayer, 2003; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002; Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007) in the literature that the use of metacognitive strategies leads to better reading comprehension performance in learners.

The research done by Mokharti and Reichard (2002), Pressley (2002), Anderson (2000), Taberski (2000) and NICHD (2000) in the area of reading comprehension has led to an increasing emphasis on the role of metacognitive awareness, which has been defined as the perceived use of reading strategies while reading. Metacognitive strategies are higher-order executive tactics that entail planning for learning, monitoring, identifying and remediating 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). O’Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasise that the lack of metacognitive approaches in learners results in a lack of direction and an inability to self-monitor their progress, accomplishments and future learning directions. Research in the area of reading comprehension has led to an increasing emphasis on the role of metacognitive awareness, which has been defined as the perceived use of reading strategies while reading (Mokharti & Reichard, 2002; Pressley, 2002).

Metacognition can be furthermore be defined as “thinking about thinking” (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007:4). Metacognitive strategies activate one’s thinking and lead to improved performance in learning (Anderson, 1991; 2002). Good readers use

metacognition strategies to think about their own reading and have control over this process, for example, before reading, learners might clarify their reason for reading and previewing the text (Pressley, 2002). 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.

Cognitive strategies are closely related to reading comprehension as they involve direct interaction with the text and contribute to facilitating comprehension, operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009). Cognitive strategies include the strategies of underlining, using titles, using the 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).

1.4.3.2 The Role of metacognition in reading comprehension

Metacognition is a term created by Flavell in 1979. In the context of reading, it refers to thinking about and controlling one's reading. Metacognition is an advanced cognitive process. However, there is ample evidence that young children plan, monitor, revise, and regulate reading. According to Philips, Norris and Vavra (2007:1), the role of metacognition in reading comprehension may be described on two levels:

- At the macro-level (the level of text organisation), readers rely upon the author's organisation of the text (headings, paragraph length, main ideas and summaries) to get a sense of how to interpret the text (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007).
- At the micro-level (the level of sentences), readers endeavour to understand individual words and idea units in the context of their use, and to make sense of phrases and sentences in order to connect the text information with their relevant background knowledge (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007). These connections require readers to attend to and monitor their sense of interpretation. Readers use a variety of strategies to make decisions, such as whether to be tentative, to reread, to question, to shift focus, or to continue

(Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007). Each of these decisions requires selective use of a reader's cognitive resources in order to monitor whether interpretation is successful and to shift their focus in cases where it is not (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007). In such cases, there are numerous possible strategies controlled by metacognition.

What seems to be important in reading comprehension is for the reader to be aware of strategies, for example, knowing how, when, and where to use a particular strategy. Examples of this is when to reread because something is not making sense, when to remain tentative until more information is provided, and when to shift focus because the vocabulary choice made does not seem to make sense in the context of the story being read. Teachers must teach learners to set a goal for their reading, and to monitor and check regularly whether they understand what they are reading (Zimmerman, 1998). Teachers should also teach learners to use alternative strategies (Zimmerman, 1998), for example, if learners come to an unknown word, teach them to reread, to use pictures as clues, and to think about what would make sense based on what they have read. In addition, teachers need to teach learners to reflect on their reading in order to assess whether they have met their reading goal, to identify what caused a problem and to think about how to read differently next time (Philips, Norris & Vavra, 2007).

Cognitive strategies refer to integrating new material with prior knowledge. Cognitive strategies involve direct interaction with the text and contribute to facilitating comprehension; they operate directly on oncoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009:284). Cognitive strategies that learners use to acquire, learn, remember, retrieve and understand the material while reading includes rehearsal, elaboration, and organisational strategies (Pereira-Laird & Deane, 1997:190).

These two concepts are important in reading comprehension and, even though they seem to be different, they both complement each other. Cognitive strategies are necessary for learners to be able to perform the task of reading, while metacognitive strategies are necessary to understand how the task has been performed. Aarnoutse and Schellings (2003), and Van Keer (2004) indicate that good readers

employ different cognitive and metacognitive strategies before, during and after reading text.

In the same vein, Lenz (2005) and Armbruster *et al.*, (2003) state that the most practical way of thinking about teaching reading comprehension is to organise instruction according to how the teacher would want learners to think about strategies. The Texas Education Agency (2002), Lenz (2005:2) and Armbruster *et al.*, (2003:45-57) list three ways of organising comprehension strategies and thinking about strategies that one might use. These include, before reading (phase 1), during reading (phase 2) and after reading (phase 3).

Phase 1: Before-reading strategies

Before-reading consists of those strategies that a learner learns to use to get ready to read a text selection. These strategies help learners to get an idea of what the author might be trying to say and how the information might be useful, and to create a mental set that might be useful for taking in and storing information. These strategies could include previewing headings, surveying pictures, reading introductions and summaries, creating a pre-reading outline, creating questions that might need to be answered, making predictions that need to be confirmed (Lenz, 2005:2; Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:45-57).

Phase 2: During-reading strategies

During-reading consists of those strategies that learners learn to use while they are reading a text selection. These strategies help the learner to focus on how to determine what the author is actually trying to say, to match the information with what the author is actually saying and then to match the information with what the child already knows. These strategies should be influenced by the before-reading strategies because learners should be using or keeping in mind the previews, outlines, questions, and predictions (Lenz, 2005:2; Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:45-57).

Phase 3: After-reading strategies

The after-reading process consists of those strategies that learners use when they have finished reading a text selection. The aim is to help the learner to look back and think about the message of the text and determine the intended or possible meanings that might be important. These strategies are used to follow up and

confirm what was learnt, for example to answer questions or confirm predictions from the use of the before- and during-reading strategies. However, after-reading strategies also help the reader to focus on determining what the big, critical, or overall idea of the author's message is and how it might be used before moving on to performance tasks or other learning tasks (Lenz, 2005:2; Armbruster *et al.*, 2003:45-57).

In this study, a reading strategy consists of the appropriate skills and the knowledge that teachers teach the learners for understanding the written text.

Insofar as the teaching of reading comprehension strategies is concerned, various authors suggest many ways of teaching reading comprehension in the primary grades. All these different views have in common the notion that reading comprehension can be taught. What is important is to make learners aware of how and when to use a strategy before, during and after reading.

1.4.4 Mother tongue

Luckett (1992:5) and Kreshen (in Moswane, 2002:10) defines the mother tongue as the primary language of the family which is dominant in the immediate community. He refers to the mother tongue as the expression of the primary identity of a human being. It is the language through which a person perceives the surrounding world and through which initial concept formation takes place. The mother tongue is also the medium through which the child establishes kinship with other children and with the adults around them. Mother tongue may be used synonymously with the concept first language (home language) and refers to the language the child has learnt, usually from the parents (Langtang & Venter, in Du Plessis, 2006:21).

South Africa has 11 official languages and the Constitution of the country allows learners to be educated in any of these languages as a first language/mother tongue (DoE, 2002). For the purposes of this study, mother tongue refers to 'Tshivenda', a dominant language in the Vhembe district of Limpopo Province. Tshivenda as the home language and is the language of teaching and learning. It is the language that most residents know best and have learnt first or with which they choose to identify themselves.

1.4.5 First Additional Language

In South Africa First Additional Language (FAL) is the language learned in addition to one's home language (DoE, 2002:6). Learning a first additional language promotes multilingualism and intercultural communication. First Additional Languages provide for levels of language proficiency that meet the threshold levels necessary for effective learning across the curriculum, as learners may learn through the medium of their First Additional Language in the South African context. This includes the abstract cognitive academic language skills required for thinking and learning (DoE, 2002:6).

Learners in South Africa are required to start with a First Additional Language from Grade 1 (DoE, 2002), which usually consists of English if English is not the first language. First additional language assumes that learners do not necessarily have any knowledge of the language when they arrive at school. The curriculum starts by developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language. On this foundation it builds literacy. The learners are able to transfer the literacies they have acquired in their home language to their First Additional Language.

1.4.6 Foundation Phase

The Foundation Phase is the first phase of the general education and training (GET) band and includes Grade R (the reception year) and Grades 1, 2 and 3 (DoE, 2002:54). It focuses on primary skills, knowledge and values and lays the foundation for further learning (DoE, 2003:19). The broader aim of the Foundation Phase is to provide learners with sufficient opportunities to develop their full potential as active, responsible and fulfilled citizens (DoE, 1997:4). For the purposes of this study, the Foundation Phase includes learners from age six (in schools that have grade R) to age nine.

1.4.7 Grade 3 learners

Grade 3 learners are normally between nine and ten years old. Learners at this stage are in the concrete operational stage (Piaget, 1967:38-41). During this stage, learners begin to apply logic to concrete experiences with the result that they begin to move beyond one-dimensional thinking. According to Mwamwenda (2004:103),

the concrete operational stage hails the beginning of logical thinking based on experiences and concrete evidence. The Grade 3 class is the exit level from the Foundation Phase, Grade R, 1, 2 and 3 to the Intermediate Phase, from Grade 4, 5, 6 and 7.

For the purposes of this study, Grade 3 consists of learners between nine and ten years.

1.5 Significance of the study

The issues of reading acquisition are topical educational discussion points in many countries across the world, as well as in South Africa. Reading skills acquisition is the process of acquiring the basic skills necessary for learning to read, that is, “the ability to acquire meaning from print” (Verhoeven, 2000). The reading acquisition skills required for proficient reading fluency, the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy and vocal expression. The ability to read fluently is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension. If a reader is not fluent, it may be difficult to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge. This accuracy and automaticity of reading serves as a bridge between decoding and comprehension vocabulary. A critical aspect of reading comprehension is vocabulary development. When a reader encounters an unfamiliar word in print and decodes it to derive its spoken pronunciation, the reader understands the word if it is in the readers spoken vocabulary.

Low levels of reading amongst learners, especially in the Foundation Phase, triggered my interest in conducting this research on the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners as a specific focus within the teaching of reading. The arguments being that the development of literacy in the Foundation Phase is not properly laid in Grades 1 to 3 and that Foundation Phase teachers simply do not know how to teach reading comprehension (DoE, 2008; LDoE, 2008).

Although this might be part of the problem, there may be other factors, for example, not all schools have readers for the learners and teachers are not adequately

trained (DoE, 2008; Scheepers, 2008). A survey of 93 Foundation Phase teachers done by Lessing and De Witt (2001) indicate that more than half of the teachers were not satisfied with their initial training for teaching reading and indicated a need for further training to become competent in their classrooms.

No similar study has been carried out in the Vhembe district of the Limpopo Province. This study would therefore add knowledge about the problems teachers encounter in the teaching of reading comprehension. It is also hoped that this study can contribute to the body of knowledge about the teaching of reading comprehension strategies to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The study intends to benefit learners and teachers, and learners' parents indirectly. I hope that teachers will realise the importance of teaching reading comprehension strategies in their classrooms. They will plan the comprehension lessons strategically and engage learners using the comprehension strategies to understand the text. Indirectly, the study may influence the Department of Education and schools in realising the importance of the five phases of teaching reading comprehension as explained in the conceptual framework. This would improve the chances of learners to have a good foundation and become proficient readers who could read the text with understanding. The study could also be of value to teachers in other contexts that are similar to Vhembe district.

1.6 Research design and methodology

The study was underpinned by various research questions.

Main research question:

How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?

The sub-questions that assisted me in answering the main question are:

1. How do teachers understand reading comprehension?
2. What do teachers regard as important when teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?
3. Which strategies do teachers use when teaching reading comprehension?
4. What strategies can teachers use to improve reading comprehension?

The method of research chosen for this study is predominantly qualitative, using a case study from three schools as a research design. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). In simple terms, qualitative research is the gathering and analysis of data to obtain insights into situations of interest that would not be possible using other types of research (Gay, 1996:208). Creswell (2008:2) defines qualitative research as “an enquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.”

The qualitative researcher gains in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by using a variety of data collection strategies. In this study, I interviewed individual teachers, held focus group interviews and conducted classroom observations, and performed content analysis. By using different instruments at various points in the research process, I could build on the strength of each type of data collection and minimise the weaknesses of any single approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:408; Swanson & Holton, 1997:93).

By means of the literature review, I develop a conceptual framework consisting of five phases (figure 3.1) that represent the most important arguments of the study based on the concepts and theories, and their relationship with reading comprehension as dealt with in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the study.

1.6.1 Sampling

The research study is a case study of Grade 3 teachers in three schools in order to explore and understand the teaching of reading comprehension in the Dzindi circuit of Limpopo. I decided on purposive sampling as a method of selecting the unit analysis. Three government schools, each with two Grade 3 classes, participated in the study. The study was confined to three government schools and to two teachers per school in the Vhembe district of Limpopo Province. Thus, not all Grade 3 learners and teachers at the schools of Vhembe district were included in the study. I took a purposive sample that included three schools that were situated close to the University of Venda where I work.

1.6.2 Data collection methods and instruments

According to Kamper, Schulze and Goodwin-Davey (1999:295), methods for data collection in qualitative research cannot be prescribed. In their view, Kamper *et al.*, (1999:295) and Mouton (1996:156) strongly support the principle of triangulation (the use of multiple sources of data collection) as it enhances the reliability of the study.

I employed the following instruments for primary data collection in this research project:

- **Individual teacher interviews**

Individual interviews with teachers were conducted. The individual interviews gathered in-depth information about teachers' knowledge and strategies on reading comprehension. They also provided an important level of professional reflection, and increased the credibility of the classroom observation.

- **Classroom observations**

I adopted a naturalistic approach to studying teachers' techniques of teaching reading comprehension in the classroom at several occasions. It allowed me to observe what actually happened in the classroom pertaining to reading comprehension overtime. I chose to be a non-participant observer because I did not want to have an influence over the participating teachers. I wanted to give myself a chance to observe the interactions in the classroom without influencing the teachers, giving them a chance to can act more realistically.

- **Focus group interviews**

Focus group interviews were conducted with the six teachers who participated in the study. School B which was situated at the center was chosen as the venue where I conducted the focus group interviews. Both teachers' individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted after school. Focus group interviewing is increasingly being used in qualitative research studies (De Vos, 1998:48). Focus group interviewing is particularly effective for obtaining information about **why** people think or feel the way they do. It was hoped that through focus group interviews, the participants would provide information-rich data relevant to the study.

- **Content analysis**

Literature and documents on the teaching of reading comprehension were reviewed, as these documents informed me about the emphasis on the teaching of reading comprehension in the South African context. A content analysis (Mouton, 2001) carried out of South African policy documents on the teaching of reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase. The main emphasis was on the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE, 2002), the Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC, DoE, 2008), the National Reading Strategy (NRS, 2008) and *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008). The content analysis of the policy documents assisted me in answering my research questions

1.7 Data analysis

I applied the guidelines for constructivist theory analysis as described by Charmaz (2000:509-535) in the analysis process of my study as the research paradigm. As an interpretive researcher, I used both inductive and deductive data analysis approaches. I studied the authentic data gathered through the constructivist grounded theory analysis. The data from interviews, classroom observations, focus group and policy document were transcribed. Concepts that emerged from all the data sources were identified, coded and then grouped together to form different themes and categories. This process helped me to understand the teachers' response to the teaching of reading comprehension.

1.8 Outline and organisation of the study

The study is organised into six chapters. The ensuing chapters broadly cover the following aspects:

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 sets the background to the study and outlines the features of the research project. It describes the research questions that were investigated. The paradigmatic perspective underpinning this study is discussed and contextualised. The methodology and the data collection methods are also outlined.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 discusses the literature review. This chapter sets the basis and context of the study. The teaching of reading comprehension in the international and South African context was reviewed for constructing my argument. Most of the literature I used was from international sources.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, a review of the literature relating to the strategies teachers use before, during and after reading a text was undertaken in order to establish a theoretical understanding of and a basis for developing research instruments.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 elaborates on the research design and methodology choices of the study. Key features of the chapter are justification for and discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of the data collection methods. Interviews, classroom observations, focus group discussions and content analysis were used in the data gathering process.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results of the data and key themes that emerged from the data gathered through the methods discussed in Chapter 4. The results are analysed according to themes. An interpretation is offered for each theme and the themes are discussed to offer a holistic understanding of the result and the findings.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 offers recommendations for teachers and policy makers. The recommendations are discussed in detail and offer suggestions for improving the situation regarding reading comprehension.

1.9 Conclusion

Chapter 1 has given a comprehensive overview and outline of the state of reading comprehension globally, the approaches and strategies to reading comprehension facing South Africa. It positions South Africa in terms of other countries. South Africa is regarded as the leading country in Africa. Therefore, the state of reading comprehension of learners is viewed with urgency. Comprehension is foundational to the learners and later in their lives.

In Chapter 2, I review literature related reading comprehension in the national and international contexts.