

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

*'We encourage all teachers to explore the research, open their minds to changes in their instructional practice, and take up the challenge of helping all children become successful readers'*  
(Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2003: iii)

### 4.1 Introduction

This study set out primarily to explore and record the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. Constructivism is the underpinning research paradigm of this study. The reason for this is because I attempted to construct multiple realities during the teaching of reading comprehension in Grade 3 classrooms. This study is qualitative in nature and used an interpretive paradigm to understand which strategies teachers employ in teaching reading comprehension.

The study was divided into three phases. The first phase of the study entailed individual interviews with six Grade 3 teachers. The second phase involved classroom observations. During the classroom observations, I acted as a non-participant observer. The objective of the classroom observations was to establish whether what the teachers had said during the individual teachers' interview sessions was borne out in practice. I observed four reading comprehension lessons per class to determine which strategies teachers used before, during and after reading. I used a classroom observation checklist. I accessed the original checklist from Henk *et al.*, (2000) about a reading lesson observations framework for elementary teachers, principals, and literacy supervisors which I adapted to suit the context of the study.

The third phase of my research project involved a focus group interviews with the six teachers who participated in the study. The discussion was centred on teachers' understanding of the concept of reading comprehension and the strategies they

used to teach reading comprehension before, during and after reading. The research questions that framed this study are discussed below and linked to the research methodology.

The paradigmatic considerations of this study are concerned with interpretivism. In this chapter, I have described the informal and formal phases of the study and explained the methodology of individual teachers' interviews, classroom observations and focus group interviews with the teacher participants. In addition, I explained the content analysis that relate to the teaching of reading comprehension. Then I discussed the data analysis process and the strategies employed to enhance validity of the study.

## **4.2 Research questions**

The research questions are important for understanding the choice of the methodology and the direction the study took. The research questions were derived from the aim of the study, which was to investigate the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The process of collecting data was informed by content analysis, individual teachers' interviews, classroom observations and focus group interviews with the participant teachers. Each instrument helped me to answer the research questions. The research questions are dealt with individually and linked to the methodology for data collection.

### **Main research question: How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?**

This question was the key to the study. It provided an understanding of how teachers approach and facilitate reading comprehension in the classroom. Individual teachers' interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations were employed with the Grade 3 teachers.

The purpose of conducting individual interviews focus group interviews and classroom observations was to identify the method and strategies they used for teaching reading comprehension. Interviews were audio-recorded and this provided rich data. The focus group interviews consisted of six teachers, two from each school. A content analysis was carried out of all policy documents related to the

teaching of reading in the primary grades. These include National curriculum Statement (NCS), Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC), *Teaching Reading in Early Grades* and National Reading Strategy (NRS).

I discerned how teachers understood the teaching of reading comprehension. The teachers were asked about their familiarity with the concept of reading comprehension and the teaching methods and strategies they used to teach reading comprehension. By focusing on the teachers' classroom practice, I gained insight into their beliefs and theoretical base. This was particularly important because there is an integral relationship between beliefs and actions. I believe that teachers' beliefs play a major role in their decision-making about the teaching of reading comprehension. My attempt to answer my main research question led me to pose a number of sub-questions. Three sub-questions guided me to focus on the most appropriate research methodology.

**Sub-question 1: What do teachers understand by reading comprehension?**

This question was key to understanding teachers' knowledge of the concept of reading comprehension. Therefore, through individual teachers' interviews and focus group interviews with the Grade 3 teachers, I gathered information on how the six teachers that participated in the study conceptualised reading comprehension.

**Sub-question 2: What do teachers regard as important when teaching reading comprehension?**

This sub-question is linked to what teachers regarded as important aspects when teaching reading comprehension. It probed the teachers' knowledge base and understanding of the concept of reading comprehension, teaching strategies and the relevant policy documents. I conducted two individual teacher interviews and focus group interviews.

**Sub-question 3: Which strategies do teachers use in teaching reading comprehension?**

The third sub-question was a key to understanding the provision and position of government policies in addressing the teaching of reading and reading comprehension. A content analysis was carried out on all major and minor policy documents in South Africa. The main emphasis was on the NCS (DoE, 2002), FFLC

(DoE, 2008), NRS (DoE, 2008) and *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008), and their role in helping teachers in teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners.

Through two sessions of individual teachers' interviews and two sessions of focus group interviews, I had the opportunity to listen to the teachers and find out their views regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. Classroom observations were done in three government schools, each with two Grade 3 classes and where Tshivenda is used for teaching and learning. Through classroom observations, I saw and observed how teachers teach reading comprehension, which strategies they use in teaching reading comprehension in the real classroom setting. Classroom observations were conducted to explore and to find out if what they said during the interviews and focus group discussions match or not.

#### **Sub-question 4: What strategies can teachers use to improve reading comprehension?**

The fourth sub-question was also key to understanding the provision and position of government policies and the availability of literature in addressing the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda teachers. Relevant national and international literature was reviewed on the subject. However, little research exists on the teaching of reading comprehension in South Africa. Because of that, most of the sources in Chapter 2 are from America and other countries. From the literature, South Africa can learn about the teaching of reading comprehension, and which strategies teachers can use to improve reading comprehension to the learners.

The conceptual framework on Chapter 4, Figure 3.1, shows teachers the steps to be followed when teaching reading comprehension. The aim is that learners should improve their reading comprehension level. The framework in Figure 3.1 reflects a pathway to enable teachers to provide support to the learners (see Chapter 3, sections 3.4.1; 3.4.2; 3.5).

## 4.3 Paradigmatic considerations

### 4.3.1 Qualitative paradigm

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.” In other words, qualitative research is concerned with the meaning of human behaviour and experiences, and of its social functions. This view is further advanced by Merriam (2002:12), who defines qualitative research as “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible.”

To enable the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, qualitative research makes use of a variety of methods and data collection strategies. In this study, I used classroom observations, individual teachers’ interviews and focus group interviews with the teachers and content analysis. This helped to make the results credible and valid. By using different methods at various points in the research process, I could build on the strength of each type of data collection and minimise the weaknesses of a single approach (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:408; Swanson & Holton, 1997:93).

There are many features attributing to the qualitative research approach. One of the features I considered was that qualitative methods are naturalistic. Participants are seen in their ‘natural setting’ with all its complexities and ambiguities. I wished to gain insight into the teaching of reading comprehension by observing it in the natural setting of the classroom. The qualitative approach has the potential to uncover how and why people do things. In my study, I wished to uncover the teachers’ teaching of reading comprehension and the strategies they used to teach reading comprehension. I chose the qualitative approach because it aims to study situations in their natural settings in an attempt to interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings that people attach to them.

Another reason that motivated my selection of qualitative research was the nature of the research questions. A research question that requires detailed, in-depth information regarding a certain matter is among those regarded as suitable for qualitative research (Mertens, 1998:162). As in-depth information about teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners was required, the research question of this study needed qualitative research methods. By using qualitative research, I collected an abundance of data that helped me to understand how teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners.

#### **4.3.2 Interpretive paradigm**

This research is interpretive, descriptive and explanatory, which gives me an opportunity to understand and give meaning to the topic of the research. Teachers and learners interact with each other, giving meaning to what they are doing and why they are doing it. The paradigm helped me to understand and interpret teachers' actions when teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The paradigm also shaped my understanding of teachers' knowledge and experiences about teaching reading. According to Jackson (2003), the interpretive paradigm involves interpreting and understanding human action. Bassey (1999:40) also sees interpretive research as a category of empirical research. He describes interpretive research as research that focuses on data collection. Human action must be interpreted to give it meaning. In my case, I listened, observed teachers' actions when teaching reading comprehension and tried to understand how they taught reading comprehension through their actions. During observation, I was able to see and understand their actions when teaching reading comprehension in their classrooms. Subsequently, I explored the relationship between their knowledge, experiences and actions by analysing what I had observed in the classroom.

In the light of the above, I regard myself as an interpretivist who wanted to interpret and give meaning to the data I collected on the teaching of reading comprehension in Grade 3 Tshivenda classrooms.

#### 4.4 Research design

I used the case study design (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). Yin (2003:5) defines a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” Stake (1995:3) defines a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.” In other words, the case study is a way of investigating an empirical topic by following a set of pre-specified procedures. I used the case study methodology because I was dealing with a single case, looking at a specific grade and a specific number of participants in a particular area and community.

According to Opie (2004:74), the purpose of the case study is to maximise understanding of one phenomenon to provide greater insights into an issue or to improve theoretical explanation. Furthermore, the case study emphasises the evolving nature of qualitative research, which corresponds with the exploratory and descriptive approaches and inductive and deductive interpretation. I focused on a real situation (teaching), with real people (learners and teachers) in an environment familiar to myself (classrooms) in order to answer my research questions. I studied the interactions of events, human relationships and other factors. Merriam (1998:27) refers to a case as the object of study. She defines it as “a thing, a single entity, and a unit around which there are boundaries.” To her, a case can be a person such as learners, a teacher, a school, and a community, even a specific policy. For Creswell (2008:439), a case means a single individual, several individuals separately or in a group, a programme, events or activities. In line with all these definitions, I identified the case of my study as the experiences of teachers and learners during the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners in the Vhembe district.

Merriam (1998:40) explains that the value of a particular research design is intrinsically related to the motivation for selecting it as the most appropriate plan for addressing the research problem. She argues that one of the advantages of an instrumental case study is that unlike experimental, survey, or historic research, it does not favour any particular method for collecting or analysing data. Any method,

from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study to gather data (Merriam, 1998:28). For me that was a definite advantage because it opened up the possibility of obtaining information from a variety of sources. Merriam (1998:33) highlights two more advantages. A case study may be selected “for its very uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to.” Merriam (1998:41) also states that a case study offers a way of “exploring complex social units with numerous variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon.” This is of value in my study where the complex nature of a phenomenon like reading comprehension is examined.

On the other hand, Merriam (1998:42) claims that case studies are limited by the investigator’s sensitivity and integrity. She also asserts that although rich, thick description and analysis of a phenomenon may be desired, a researcher may not have enough time or money to devote to such an undertaking. There are other limitations involving the issue of reliability, validity and generalisability. However, I share the opinion of Merriam (1998:41) that “because of its strengths, [the] case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education.” In this study I wished to capture the teachers’ teaching of reading comprehension without having to first deconstruct the component elements or their relevance, a process I hoped would only emerge later. The recognition of the “embeddedness of social truths” in a case study approach had a special appeal to me and created an expectation that some elements of such social truths might be uncovered through this case. I gathered data through various methods that enabled me to have an in-depth description of my case, which was valid as the findings can be transferable.

#### **4.5 Research sites and participants and research**

The research consisted of investigations at three schools. The schools (A, B, and C) were situated in the Dzindi Circuit, Vhembe District (see the map in Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1 Limpopo province showing Vhembe district**

I chose three schools with two Grade 3 classes each, which gave a total of six teachers who participated in the study. The reason was to ensure that the data generated by such a number of participants would be manageable given the limited time in which I had to conduct the research (Mugo, 2006). I selected three government schools situated within 10 to 15 kilometres of each other.

Maxwell (2005:88) defines purposeful selection of cases as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be forgotten as well from the choices.” This study used purposeful selection of cases because purposeful selection of the schools. The teacher participants were selected from public schools where Tshivenda is the language of teaching and learning. The easy accessibility to the schools increased the study’s feasibility as the schools are close to my workplace. Maxwell (2005:26) defines the choice of cases as “decisions about where to conduct the research and whom to involve, an essential part of the research processes.” He adds that the choice of cases usually involves people and settings, events and processes. McMillan and Schumacher (1997:434) define purposeful selection of choices of cases as “a strategy to choose individuals likely to be knowledgeable and

informative about the phenomenon of interest.”This implies that a convenience choice of cases refers to the selection of an accessible geographical area. I used pseudonyms to protect the schools and teachers’ privacy and to maintain confidentiality. During selection of cases, consideration was given to variables that were rationally relevant for the study.

#### **4.5.1 Profile of the three schools**

The three schools in the study are situated in a rural setting. Each had two Grade 3 classes. School A’s classes ranged from Grade R to Grade 7, whereas schools B and C had classes from Grade R to Grade 4.

In this research project, the focus was on the teaching of reading comprehension. Learners were also primary respondents because I could not observe how teachers teach reading comprehension without the presence of the learners in the classrooms. Schools have been categorised into quintiles 1, 2, 3 and 4, for example, school A is referred to as quintile 1, while schools B and C are referred to as quintile 2. Schools under quintiles 1 and 2 are both no-fee schools. These schools cannot ask parents for any payment at all. In terms of funding from the department, quintile 1 gets more funding than quintile 2. Most of these learners speak Tshivenda because their parents grew up in this area and they speak Tshivenda as their home language.

School A is a primary school with an enrolment of 534 learners. There are 17 teachers in the school, teaching classes from Grade R to Grade 7. It was the only school that had classes up to Grade 7. There were six teachers in the Foundation Phase, two Grade 2 classes and two Grade 3 classes. The other teachers rotated from the Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase. Each Grade 3 class had 39 learners. The school is 52 years old and the building that we see in the picture on page (iii) is a new building that is 12 years old.

School B is a primary school with an enrolment of 564 learners. There were 22 teachers teaching classes from Grade R to Grade 4. There was no school library. The school is 28 years old and the building that we see in the picture on page (iii) is a new building that is 11 years old.

School C has an enrolment of 491 learners, with 19 teachers teaching classes from Grade R to Grade 4. There was no school library. The school is 52 years old and the new building in the picture on page iii is 12 years old. School C is 58 years old and the new building that we see from the picture on page iii is a new building, which is 15 years old.

What is interesting about the case study schools is that they have come to realise that Foundation Phase is important. The new classes have been provided for the Foundation Phase learners.

#### **4.5.2 Profile of the teacher respondents**

The profile of the participating teachers as my participants enabled me to gather important information on the teaching of reading comprehension, for example, their academic and professional qualifications were an indication of the high calibre of the respondents I worked with. It also provided me with a picture of the level to which these teachers were likely to understand the dynamics of teaching reading comprehension within their context. This was pertinent because I needed to know this when gathering and interpreting the data. My teaching experience also assisted me in determining whether the views and opinions of respondents were appropriate and in line with their knowledge of the job.

The selected teachers were all qualified to teach in the Foundation Phase, with the exception of one teacher from School C who held a senior teacher's diploma (STD). In order to gain an even deeper understanding of the respondents, I collected data on their teaching experience, age, qualifications and experience in teaching Grade 3. The findings to this effect are presented in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 Teacher respondent profiles**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Experience in Grade 3</b>
Respondent 1	School A Grade 3A	46	Female	JPTD, ACE	6
Respondent 2	School A Grade 3B	43	Female	JPTD	6
Respondent 3	School B Grade 3B	53	Female	PTC, HED, BED	12
Respondent 4	School B Grade 3B	47	Female	JPTD, BA, BED, MED	8
Respondent 5	School C Grade 3A	48	Female	STD,BA, BED	9
Respondent 6	School C Grade 3B	52	Female	JPTD,BA,BED	6

**Key to qualifications**

JPTD: Junior Primary Teacher’s Diploma;

ACE: Advanced Certificate in Education;

PTC: Primary Teacher’s Certificate;

HED: Higher Education Diploma;

BA: Bachelor of Arts;

BEd: Bachelor Honours in Education;

MEd: Master’s in Education;

STD: Senior Teacher’s Diploma.

Table 4.1 shows that the age range of the informants in this research project was 43-52 years. The teachers who participated in the study were quite mature in age. The fact that these teachers were mature might have an influence on their views of the teaching of reading comprehension.

Table 4.1 shows that the teachers who participated in the study were all females. This may simply mean that in many schools most teachers in the Foundation Phase are females. These teachers were not selected but randomly sampled as coincidentally were found to be in Grade 3. Since the focus of the study was on Grade 3, I had to focus on those teachers only.

Overall, the participants in the research were qualified, with four of them holding university degrees. Of these, one had a Master's degree in education. Only one teacher – teacher 2 from School A, had a three-year Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma (JPTD). Teacher 1 from School B had a three-year JPTD and an ACE in Learner Support. She claimed that her JPTD and ACE gave her credit equivalent to a bachelor's degree. She had furthermore registered with a university for a BEd. Teacher 3 from School B, the oldest of the six participating teachers had a two-year professional certificate previously known as the Primary Teacher's Certificate (PTC). The PTC was specifically meant for primary school teachers. Teacher 5 at School C had a professional qualification, the Senior Teacher's Diploma (STD), meant for teaching from Grade 4 to Grade 7.

Teacher qualifications were important for this study, because teachers all need quality education and training in order to meet the learning needs of the learners in South African schools, especially in the Foundation Phase. With adequate professional and academic qualifications, teachers may be able to promote efficiency in their classrooms. In addition, it is well known that teachers in possession of professional degrees are perceived as being better qualified for the teaching profession than those with diplomas and certificates only (Naidoo, 2001). I assumed that these teachers with their wealth of experience and professional qualifications were likely to give valuable responses. Therefore, if educational qualifications are a factor in teaching reading comprehension, then one may conclude that these teachers are better informed in so far as teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 is concerned. This implies that the presence of well-qualified professional teachers therefore acts as an enabling factor as far as the teaching of reading comprehension is concerned.

The table also shows that the respondents had extensive teaching experience, ranging between 6 and 12 years in Grade 3. They were all experienced in teaching in the Foundation Phase as none of the participants had fewer than five years of teaching experience in Grade 3. This suggested that the participating teachers in this study were generally mature and experienced in the Foundation Phase, in particular in Grade 3. This characteristic thus became an enabling factor in terms of the research questions of this project, because the longer the teaching experience of an individual in a particular class, the better he/she is likely to understand the

methods and strategies of teaching reading comprehension and its related issues and be able to facilitate them effectively. Based on their teaching experience in Grade 3, I assumed that these teachers were information-rich and would provide valid and meaningful data that would contribute to an understanding of how teachers teach reading comprehension.

### **4.5.3 Research process**

In this section, I present an account of the informal and formal phases of my data collection strategies (Evans, 2005:51-52). A preliminary literature review on the teaching of reading comprehension indicated that extensive research exists on the subject (NRP, 2000). However, the literature confirmed that minimal research had been done on the teaching of reading comprehension, in particular the teaching of Tshivenda-speaking learners as the focus of the study.

#### **4.5.3.1 Informal data collection strategies**

I commenced this research project by conducting a pilot study during the teaching practice period at my university, where I had an opportunity to interview teachers for about 30 minutes, observe in classes and conduct focus group interviews with both teachers and student teachers on teaching reading comprehension. I conducted the pilot study with teachers whose schools did not participate in the study. The reason for this was that I did not want to prepare those who would participate in the study about the aim of the study.

Although I have experience of teaching in the Foundation Phase, I was initially still indecisive on how interviews, a classroom observation schedule and focus group discussions with teachers should be conducted and how to assist teachers to express themselves to provide data for answering my research questions. After consulting the literature on the teaching of reading comprehension, I constructed an interview schedule, classroom observation schedule and focus group interview schedule. After consulting with my supervisors, I conducted individual interviews, classroom observations and focus group interviews with the teachers in the pilot study. The results of the pilot study assisted me to identify some gaps in my

instruments. The pilot study also gave an indication of what teachers were thinking in regard to teaching reading comprehension.

#### **4.5.3.2 Formal data collection strategies**

During the formal data collection period, I used individual teacher interviews as the first data collection instrument (see Appendix C). The reason was that since a focus group interview involved a group I wanted to first listen to the individual teachers without being influenced by colleagues before the focus group interviews. This was followed by classroom observations and then teachers' focus group interviews. I selected these tools as they were directed by my research questions. I wanted to find out from my research participants how teachers taught reading comprehension and which strategies teachers used in teaching reading comprehension. I regarded my tools as guiding principles towards interpreting the information gathered. The tools further brought out the qualitative nature of these interactions and helped me to comprehend the 'why' and 'how' of teaching reading comprehension in Grade 3 classrooms.

The four research instruments, namely individual teachers' interviews, classroom observations, focus group interviews and content analysis, were used for triangulation in the study. Since the focus of the study was on the teaching of reading comprehension, I thought it would be appropriate to review the relevant policy documents and analyse them. This was a way to find out if there was any policy document in place that explained to the teachers how they should teach reading comprehension in a Tshivenda classroom. Since this study was an in-depth case study, using the four instruments helped to validate the findings, since the findings from all the instruments could converge to inform one phenomenon, namely the teaching of reading comprehension of Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners.

#### **4.5.3.3 Personal role in research process**

During the research process, I established a good relationship with the teachers. Prior to any data collection process I obtained official permission to perform research and adhered to ethical research principles. This was followed by the application for permission to conduct the research at the schools identified. I went to

the schools and sought permission from teachers to conduct my research in their classrooms. They agreed and signed consent forms. After these meetings I started with my formal data collection sessions. When collecting data I made an attempt to be as objective as possible. I collected data by means of individual teachers' interviews, classroom observations and focus group interviews, applying triangulation to establish trustworthiness of the data. During the two sessions of teachers' individual interviews I had a meeting with each teacher after school. I used field notes and listened to the audiotape recordings in order to transcribe the raw data. During classroom observation, I acted as a non-participant observer. I sat and recorded live observation of reading comprehension lessons in the time agreed with each school. The role of non-participant observer assisted me to record everything that I saw and heard without interrupting the teacher. The only time that I discussed anything with the teachers was after the lesson for clarification. The time spent in each classroom observation lesson was one hour and 30 minutes per session. The time for reading was 30 minutes (DoE, 2008). My focus was on the teaching of reading comprehension. I subsequently listened to the audiotape recordings of the lesson observed.

After three sessions of classroom observations per class, I conducted a first session of focus group interviews with the teachers (see Appendix D). Raw data was transcribed and then analysed. As part of my data collection, I kept field notes which supplemented my classroom observations, and I referred to my schedule list throughout the study. I listened to the audiotape recordings of the discussion. This also assisted me to add on the classroom observations schedule. I also reviewed the current policy on the teaching of reading comprehension. From the literature, I realised that reading comprehension is a broad area and that I could not rely on existing research on the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners, as there was no evidence of such research.

#### **4.5.4 Data collection methods and instruments**

In this study, the principle of triangulation for determining validity and reliability was applied as a wide range of data collection methods were used in this study (Schurink, 1998:253). The triangulation principle of hypothesis-generating, writing theoretical memos and theoretical sampling was applied.

I first develop an objective and constraints of the problem. The hypothesis-generating phase involves a careful review of data and careful studying of the phenomenon in question. It furthermore indicates the set of data that may be relevant to the investigation.

I kept the record of theoretical memos. These can be anything written or drawn in the constant comparison that makes up a grounded theory (GT). Theoretical memos are important tools to both refine and keep track of the experiences just after they happen.

I collect data, codes, and analyses and then decide what data to collect next and where to find it in order to develop theory. Charmaz (2000) suggests that theoretical sampling is best used when key concepts have been discovered. Initial data collection is commenced with a fairly random group of people, who have experienced the phenomenon under study to begin to develop concepts. Theoretical sampling is then used to generate further data in order to confirm and refute original categories.

Content analysis was reviewed to determine what is understood by the teaching of reading comprehension. In the next paragraphs, each data collection instrument is discussed in detail.

#### **4.5.4.1 Interviews**

I conducted two sessions of individual teachers' interview. During the interviews, I engaged the teachers' three broad questions on the phenomenon of enquiry. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:353), the individual teachers' interview is "a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening." They state that interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways we use to try and understand our fellow human beings. Individual teachers' interviews were conducted after school and not during school hours. This was to avoid disturbing the teaching schedule. The reason for the individual teachers' interviews was to get information from the participating teachers themselves, thereby ensuring getting relevant and credible data.

I also considered the way in which the data would be employed, the kind of information needed and resources available (Patton, 1990). The interviews were face-to-face and took a semi-structured, in-depth form, as the intention was to gain access to teachers' experiences of teaching reading comprehension. May (2002), notes that the advantage of an in-depth interview is to encourage full disclosure by the participants. I used open-ended questions to avoid getting 'yes' or 'no' answers as they do not yield much information in connection with the subject at hand. Open-ended questions are flexible and allow the interviewer to probe (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). At the beginning of each individual teachers' interview, I greeted the interviewee and chatted briefly with her to enable them to relax and to set the mood for the interview. I stated the purpose of the interview and the research question, which formed the basis of discussion. Interviewees were informed that their identity and that of their schools would not be revealed. I asked permission to tape the interviews and to use the information in my research. I also ensured that before the interviews started the tape recorder had been switched on, a lesson I had learnt during the pilot interview phase. I listened attentively to the interviewees as they relayed their experiences. Whenever I realised that a question had not yielded much information, I followed up by asking another question that would elicit more details. Probing was used throughout the interviews so that the interviewees would outline their experiences in connection with the subject under discussion (see Appendix F for an example of transcripts of data).

I listened to the interviewee, attempting to question and probe in ways that I would gather the best data, and trying to manage the process so that I knew how much time had passed, and how much time was left. The time allocated for the individual interviews was 30 minutes. I used semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix C). Cohen *et al.*, (2000:279) view the semi-structured interview as one in which the content and procedures are organised in advance, and the sequence determined by means of a schedule. I also prepared my interview questions in advance, studied them, and started practicing how I was going to carry out the interview. At the end of the interviews, I thanked the interviewees and promised that I would contact them again to seek clarification on issues raised if the need arose and to give them an opportunity to verify that what I had transcribed was in line with what transpired during the interviews.

The advantage of using individual teachers' interviews for this study was the rich data gathered from the interviewees. I noticed that through the interviews, new understandings on teaching reading comprehension were obtained because of the relationship that developed between the teachers and me. However, the disadvantage of interviews is that they are prone to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer and can distort what the respondents really mean (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). To correct the possible bias of the individual interviews, I taped and transcribed the interviews and I also conducted focus group interviews to collect more data.

#### **4.5.4.2 Focus group interviews**

A focus group interview was conducted with all six teachers. The focus group interview data complemented the individual teachers' interviews and the classroom observations. This is according to Krueger's (1994:16-20) opinion that multiple focus groups interviews with similar participants are needed to detect patterns and trends across groups. The results obtained from a single group could be unreliable as one group could be unresponsive and reluctant to participate. Mertens (1998:174) supports Krueger by saying that several focus group interviews are needed when the research is highly structured and exploratory. By bringing together small groups of Grade 3 teachers, I obtained information regarding the nature of problems related to the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners and in particular in respect of my research question. I hoped that through questions, the conversation would develop naturally. Each session lasted no longer than one hour. However, focus group interviews have their own limitations in that some participants are reluctant to contribute; however, in my study the participants willingly participated. In addition, I employed classroom observations.

The objective of the focus group interviews was to find out about the teachers' understanding of reading comprehension and what strategies they employed in teaching reading comprehension. The focus group interviews were valuable for this study because the participants interacted with one another rather than the interviewer. At the end of the session, the participants' agenda predominates and not that of the interviewer (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:288). Because the focus of the study

was on the teachers teaching reading comprehension, the focus group interviews were particularly effective in providing information about why teachers thought or felt the way they did about teaching reading comprehension. I intended that through the focus group interviews the participants would provide information-rich data relevant to the study.

Another goal was to uncover some of the emerging themes that affect the teaching of reading comprehension. The focus group interview design expanded on my research knowledge about teaching reading comprehension and provided practical information about the issues that affect teachers that teach reading comprehension. I made notes of the teachers' responses in a notepad, and audio recordings were made. This strategy allowed me to concentrate on the topic and the dynamics of the interview.

The focus group interviews were guided discussions where I had a list of questions in order to ensure coverage of important issues related to the topic. The questions allowed for flexibility in responding to concerns raised by the group. Interviews were conducted more than once when insufficient information was obtained from the session. This was used to verify information obtained from the first interview. This gave me the opportunity to get to know the teachers better as they became free and more confident.

#### **4.5.4.3 Classroom observations**

In this study, I conducted classroom observations. I adopted a naturalistic approach to studying teachers' techniques of teaching reading comprehension in the classroom. I wanted to gain insights into the strategies teachers employed in teaching reading comprehension. I hoped that I would be able to understand more fully how teachers taught reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. Through this method I could observe what was actually happening in the classroom when reading comprehension was taught, and which strategies teachers used for teaching reading comprehension. As a non-participant observer, I wanted to give myself a chance to observe the interactions in the classroom freely without influencing them. I planned what was going to be observed and had a clear purpose. The reading lesson observation framework included blanks to indicate the

teacher being observed, the evaluator, the school year, the date of the observation, the observation number, and which phases of the lesson and strategies apply, namely before, during and after reading. The checklist was divided into six components that are relevant to the teaching of reading comprehension.

Under each component, a series of items were included that represented criteria for evaluating the component's characteristics.

**Component 1:**

The classroom climate component dealt with the physical setting, children's access to authentic reading materials, the provision of a designated reading area as well as an area for small-group instruction, learners' active engagement and social interaction, and practices that signified that literacy was valued and promoted.

**Component 2:**

The pre-reading phase included items such as the encouragement of previewing, the activation of prior knowledge and the stimulation of interest, and vocabulary instruction.

**Component 3:**

During-reading phase. This phase involved items such as the conformation of predictions, retelling, critical judgements, application of new vocabulary and continued teacher monitoring of learner comprehension.

**Component 4:**

The after-reading phase, which involved aspects such as reading aloud and confirmed or disproved predictions based on prior knowledge, explaining, summarising, retelling, and examples of modelling provided by the teacher.

**Component 5:**

Strategies of modelling, giving clear explanations of what the strategy is and why it is useful (explicit teaching), contextualisation of skills, reading strategy use, teachers' release of responsibility and scaffolding.

**Component 6:**

Teacher's practices of effective teaching comprehension strategies.

I systematically recorded what I observed. I observed four lessons per teacher, which gave me a total of 24 lessons to be analysed. Merriam (2002:101) argues that observations are the major means of collecting data in qualitative research. She further says they offer a first-hand account of the situation under study and when combined with interviews and content analysis, allow for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated. Classroom observation assisted me to answer my research question. The advantage of classroom observation was that it assisted me to actually see what the teachers were doing rather than what they said they were doing. I could replay the audio tape to listen to how the teacher was teaching and ask follow-up questions. The disadvantage of classroom observation was that I was very close to the teachers during their lesson presentation. I realised that this may have led to subjectivity on my account that could jeopardise the factual reliability of the data (Merriam, 1998:95).

The classroom observations took four weeks. The longer I stayed in the classroom, the more I became part of the classroom environment. A special detail from these observations was discussed during each classroom observation. During classroom observations, I used a checklist. Having a checklist of classroom observation criteria assisted me to focus on aspects I wanted to investigate in the classroom before, during and after reading (see Appendix E). This classroom observation data was coded, transcribed and integrated to the themes emerged from interviews and focus group interview discussions.

#### **4.5.4.4 Content analysis**

Throughout the study, I comprehensively reviewed current literature and official policy documents with provision on the teaching of reading comprehension. I used documents such as policies and other related documents.

A content analysis was carried out on policy documents in South Africa pertaining to the teaching of reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase. The main emphasis was on the NCS (DoE, 2002), FFL (DoE, 2008), NRS (DoE, 2008) and *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008). The content analysis helped me to understand school policies and to see what might be informing the teachers'

practices, and their role in helping teachers to teach reading strategies to Tshivenda-speaking Grade 3 learners. Although documents are a good source of data for numerous reasons, they have also some disadvantages.

A limitation is that I could not interview the authors of these documents as they were mostly written by teams commissioned by the government. Fortunately, these documents were easily accessible, free and contained information that supported my subject of enquiry. Merriam (2002) confirms that documents are a particularly good source of information for qualitative case studies because they can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated. In this study, analysis of this data source lent contextual richness and assisted me to ground my inquiry within the setting. These documents assisted me to validate my study as they were based on reality and were guided by research questions and goals.

In Table 4.2 provide an overview of data collection methods and data collection instruments and I subsequently explain each aspect.

**Table 4.2: Data collection methods and data collection instruments**

<b>Methods of Data Collection</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Instrument Assisting Data Collection</b>	<b>Prompt</b>	<b>Data Capturing Method</b>
Interview	Individual interview	Researcher interviewing teachers Interview schedule	Discussion about teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners and their experiences as teachers	Informal field notes Audio tape transcription of interviews
Focus group interviews	Small group discussions	Researcher involving teachers in discussions. Researcher asking questions	Discussion about the teaching of reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners and their experiences as teachers	Focus group discussion schedule. Transcription of discussions. Audio tape, informal field notes
Observation	Classroom observation	Researcher observations. Observation schedule	None. Used 'natural field setting'	Informal field notes
Content analysis	Official policy documents with provision for teaching reading comprehension	Researcher collecting the policies	Discussion about teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners as explained in the policy documents	Researcher reviewing the literature Grounded theory Thematic analysis

#### **4.5.4.5 Field notes**

The data collection methods selected for the research project included field notes. During classroom observations, I took field notes of the experiences I had during the process of data gathering. Lessons observed were taught in Tshivenda. The field notes assisted me to gain a better understanding of how teachers taught reading comprehension. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994:74) the importance of field notes can be described as follows:

The keen observations and important conversations one has in the field cannot be fully utilized in a rigorous analysis of the data unless they are written down. The qualitative researcher's field notes contain what has been seen and heard by the researcher, without interpretation. In other words, the participant observer's primary task is to record without inferring feelings to the participants and without inferring why and how something happened.

In addition, the field notes also assisted me to access the subject and to record what I heard and observed in an obtrusive manner. The highlights of my field notes and their supporting literature are set out in Appendix L.

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

Wiersma (1991:85) maintains that qualitative data analysis requires organisation of information and data reduction. I employed the systemic guidelines of grounded theory analysis as described by Charmaz (2000). According to Maree (2011:78), data analysis, based on grounded theory, focuses on constant comparison of the data leading to coding and then categorisation of the data. Data analysis proceeded simultaneously and in progression of the data collection and data capturing processes.

Analysis commenced from individual teachers' interviews, classroom observation and focus group interviews. The actual words of the teacher participants were analysed and interpreted. Themes and categories emerged from the teachers' responses to the research questions. I suspected there would be a repetition of certain themes. This entailed transcribing the data in verbatim form. I read the entire

transcript to get a global impression of the content and look out for themes emerging from the text. I highlighted units of meaning with markers of different colours to denote related themes.

In this study, themes and categories were teachers' responses, in which they reported on their live experiences, meanings and the reality which they attached to teaching reading comprehension. According to Braun and Clark (2006: 81), 'thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality'. I incorporated categorised, related codes. These categories reflected themes, which I shall use in the discussion of the topic.

From an interpretive paradigm, I compared my findings with guiding ideas and expectations. I checked the relationship between the research findings and the textual data. I presented the findings of each instrument in relation to the research questions. With my final analysis and interpretation, I presented the case study in a rational and coherent order in an impressionistic style. In my final chapter, I integrated the findings with the literature reviewed in order to substantiate evidence in answering my research questions.

#### **4.7 Strategies for enhancing the validity of this study**

In this section, I address issues of validity as a standardised component of the process of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998:198-219). The data collection was carried out according to the research design developed for this study and throughout the research process, I was conscious of enhancing the validity of the study.

I conducted the research in an ethical manner by involving the teachers in the research process. In order to make the teachers comfortable I asked for their approval before engaging in the instruments. I applied for permission through official channels and obtained informed consent of all role players like school principals and district manager. I requested to see all the teachers who were to take part in the research project and assured them of the confidentiality for their contribution. I asked for permission to sit in the classroom, observe the teachers while teaching

reading comprehension. This period assisted me to validate the observations that informed me in designing the instruments.

This study is based on real-life experiences, obtained through probing and in-depth interviews, focus group interviews with the teachers and classroom observations. One may argue that this study may be considered as truthful interpretations or descriptions of the respondents' experience. I piloted my research during 2010 in schools that were not part of the study. The pilot study assisted me to develop and test the adequacy of my research instruments; and to develop my research questions.

To ensure that accuracy was achieved, I taped all my individual teachers' interviews and the focus group interviews to capture the exact words of the respondents. I took field notes on those important moments during all my interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations. I had two sessions of interviews and focus group discussions. I employed member checking by availing the transcriptions of the interviews to the respondents so that they would be verified. Part of this data was collected through individual interviews with each teacher who participated in the study.

To ensure trustworthiness of findings, I employed different procedures during the analysis and interpretation phases of this study. I analysed all the classroom observations, field notes, individual interviews and focus group interviews of each teacher to acquire a clear interpretation of their expressions and perceptions in an attempt to maximise authenticity. In addition, I compared the findings of certain instruments by requesting the participants' corroboration. Another procedure I employed was triangulation to ensure trustworthiness of my findings I therefore used classroom observations, teachers' individual interviews and focus group interviews to collect data.

I used multiple data collection instruments to provide data in order to strengthen a crystallisation of meaning and interpretation. This resulted in the construction of a thick description of the teachers' real experiences concerning the teaching of reading comprehension.

As the instruments assisted me in the data collection processes they provided the textual data which was at the core of my research. I report on the limitations and constraints of the data collection methods and my corrective efforts to enrich validity in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3: Data collection methods, limitations and enrichment of validity**

<b>Methods for data collection</b>	<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Enrichment of validity</b>
Prompt used to motivate teachers to participate	Imposing the researcher's own views and hindering the teachers' free expression of their perceptions	I built up a relationship of trust with the teachers
Individual interview	Teachers are inhibited to model Teachers can be shy to participate and model	I built up a relationship of trust with the teachers Teachers were assured that they could contribute freely I gained their trust and they felt free to participate
Focus group interview	Teachers can be shy to participate in a group  The most verbal teacher can take over the conversation	I built up a relationship of trust with the teachers Teachers were assured that they could contribute freely. Teachers were assured that they could contribute freely either in English or Tshivenda and that everything would be confidential
Classroom observation	Teachers can be shy to participate Unequal power relationship can inhibit teachers to 'act' naturally	Teachers were assured that they could contribute freely and that confidentiality would be observed Teachers were assured that they could contribute freely either in English or Tshivenda Special attention was paid to each of the teachers for their contributions, which were documented in their presence

## 4.8 Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I explained the research methodology adopted in this study. The chapter locates the study in the qualitative research paradigm. As part of a naturalistic approach, I employed qualitative research because the study sought to examine teachers' understandings, experiences of, and responses to the teaching

of reading comprehension. The chapter has defined the study as a case study of three schools, each with two Grade 3 classes.

Consistent with qualitative research, the data was analysed as an ongoing process in which a multi-mode approach to data collection was adopted. This approach was in keeping with the traditions of qualitative research, whose strength lies in triangulation.

In this chapter, I have summarised and described the methods, instruments and texts used in my enquiry. I explained how I attempted to improve the validity and reliability of the data collected through various methods. The various methods were chosen for their suitability for the research project. In addition, this research was in almost all instances informed by the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Ausubel and Zimmerman's applied social model of self-regulated learning.

I trust that the reader may gain insights into the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. It seems critical that teachers should be encouraged to explore the research on teaching reading comprehension and the importance of the quotation at the commencement of this chapter. This will open their minds to changes in their instructional practice, and take up the challenge of helping all learners to become successful readers.

In Chapter 5, I present the data and the analysis thereof.