

## **TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION TO GRADE 3 TSHIVENDA-SPEAKING LEARNERS**

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### **Abstract**

*The main objective of the study was to explore how teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. This qualitative study was prompted by the low levels of reading amongst these Grades 3 learners in South Africa. Three schools, each with two Grade 3 classes, were selected in this study. Data from individual interviews with teachers, focus group interviews and classroom observations revealed that there were a number of factors that contributed to the Grade 3 learners' poor performance in reading comprehension. It is recommended that teacher education programmes should be improved and that Tshivenda reading resources be made available, as these are currently extremely limited. The study also indicated that the best way to teach reading comprehension is by teaching learners a variety of strategies that they can use in order to self-regulate their comprehension when reading.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching, reading comprehension, Grade 3, Tshivenda-speaking learners, comprehension strategies, self-regulated learning.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is fundamental to a child's understanding of the text. For the learners to read and comprehend the text they should be able to interpret, analyse and evaluate texts (Dole, 2000). This means that reading without understanding maybe a waste of time to the reader. As a result, the reader may feel discouraged and frustrated.

In the same vein, Armbruster, Lehr and Osborn (2001) state "if readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading they are not reading." The most important role of the Foundation Phase teachers is to teach learners to read and construct meaning from the text (Department of Education (DoE), 2002). Reading skills acquisition thus 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, are all essential. 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 because it encompasses all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts (National Reading Panel -NRP, 2000).

As part of the government of South Africa's response to high illiteracy levels in schools, the DoE introduced various intervention strategies to address the crisis, and this include the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE, 2002), the National Reading Strategy (DoE, 2008), the Foundations for Learning Campaign (DoE, 2008) and Teaching Reading in Early Grades (DoE, 2008). The aim of these intervention strategies was to help teachers become more competent in their teaching.

However, the Annual National Assessment (ANA) results (The Times, 2011) show that there has been no improvement in Grade 3 literacy, despite the intervention strategies that government has put in place. Additionally, the ANA (2011) indicates that of the nine provinces of South Africa, Limpopo has the lowest literacy levels, including its Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners.

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 on-going (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Scherman, & Archer, 2007; The Times, 2011). It is critical; therefore, that research is carried out to establish possible reasons for this situation in South African schools.
- Reading in mother tongue is a critical skill for learners as this can assist them to understand other languages, since the majority of school learners, especially in areas like Vhembe, use Tshivenda as a language of learning and teaching, and not English. They thus need to be able to read and understand texts in order to pursue knowledge in a wide range of texts outside of the classroom.

The importance of the study is that it adds knowledge regarding the challenges teachers encounter in the teaching of reading comprehension in Tshivenda.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The lack of reading skills is particularly apparent in the Foundation Phase (Fleisch, 2008). It is indicated that the literacy basis in the Foundation Phase is not properly laid in Grades 1 to 3 and that the Foundation Phase teachers, especially Tshivenda-speaking teachers, do not know how to teach reading comprehension (Reeves, Heugh, Prinsloo, McDonald, Netshitangani, Alidou, Diedericks & Herbst, 2008). Although this may be part of the problem, it is assumed that there may be other contributing factors, for example, not all schools have class readers for the learners (Scheepers, 2008). Heugh (2005) argues "while a teachers' handbook for teaching reading in English has been developed and widely distributed across South African schools, the DoE has still not published a single handbook for teaching reading in any other African language."

This is a serious concern, since the emphasis is on sustaining indigenous African knowledge. According to the National Education Policy (DoE, 1996), every child has the right to mother tongue education. A survey of 93 Foundation Phase teachers done by Lessing and De Witt (2005) indicates that more than half of the Foundation Phase teachers were not satisfied with their initial training for teaching reading in their mother-tongue and indicated a need for further training to enable them to become competent in their classrooms. Fleisch (2008) indicates that unless a proper groundwork is laid in primary schools, children will continue to struggle in education.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The issues of reading acquisition are topical, educational discussion in many countries across the world, as well as in South Africa (Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II), 2000; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 2007; the Department of Education Systematic Evaluation Foundation Phase, 2007 and The Times, 2011). These issues include reading acquisition skills required for proficient reading fluency, the ability to read orally with speed, and accuracy and vocal expression (DoE, 2008a; 2008b). The ability to read fluently, then, 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 (NRP, 2000).

### ***Aim of the Study***

The aim of the study was to explore and understand how teachers teach reading comprehension in their classrooms in order to support their Tshivenda-speaking learners.

### ***Objectives of the study***

- Explore how teachers understand and attach meaning to the concept reading comprehension;
- Establish what teachers regard as important when teaching reading comprehension;
- Identify which strategies they use to teach reading comprehension;
- Analyse and describe through a review of literature the importance of reading comprehension strategies;
- Identify strategies which teachers can use to improve the teaching of reading comprehension.

The study was framed by the main research question: How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?

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

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

The data generated from these questions were instrumental in understanding the processes and strategies that the teachers use in teaching reading comprehension.

### ***Towards a Theoretical Framework on Teaching Reading Comprehension***

Five main theories are identified about what results in successful reading comprehension, namely Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky's socio-historical theories of cognitive development, Bruner's theory of learning and development, Bandura's theory and Ausubel's cognitive field theory, as being relevant to the study because teachers have to integrate theory into practice and develop balanced coping strategies appropriate at improving the teaching of reading comprehension. This study was based on the belief that reading comprehension can be taught and learnt, and that it cannot just happen (NRP, 2000). This implies that teachers must have theoretical knowledge and practice to be able to motivate learners to a level where they can initiate, change and sustain learning in specific contexts to become masters of their own learning.

For Piaget (1967), learning is a process of internal construction. In teaching reading comprehension, learners must construct knowledge in their own minds through the guidance of more knowledgeable people namely, teachers.

Vygotsky's (1968) theory has implications for teaching reading comprehension, because in facilitating learning, the teacher must take the cultural context of the learners into consideration as it influences their thinking and actions. Learners can be given problem-solving activities with instructions for the task of reading comprehension. Thereafter, the learner should work independently, using his/her own knowledge and skills with the guidance received from the teacher.

The implications of Bruner's theory (1973) for teaching reading comprehension is that new concepts should be presented repeatedly, initially at a simple level, and overtime at an increasingly difficult level – a concept Bruner referred to as the "spiral ordering of content."

Ausubel's theory (1963) has implications for teaching reading comprehension because teachers must be aware of the fact that certain minimal levels of intellectual maturity are necessary before various subjects can be taught with a reasonable degree of efficiency and success. Therefore, teachers must use the existing interests of learners, consider their point of view and take into account their limitations in the command of language and their grasp of concepts.

According to Bandura's theory (1977), learners imitate what they see other people do, be it their parents or their teachers. In teaching reading comprehension, teachers are seen as good models, as they usually have positive and nurturing relationships with learners. They should therefore display positive reading comprehension strategies so that learners can imitate and internalise these.

This study was based on Zimmerman's (1998) model of self-regulated learning which suggests that acquiring self-regulatory competence is important to prepare students to learn by themselves. This model is organised within a learning cycle based on three types of self-effective thoughts, namely goal setting and strategic planning, self-monitoring of one's accuracy in implementing a

selected strategy, and self-assessment of strategy outcome and task performance (Zimmerman, 1998).

The comprehension strategies were reviewed with scientific evidence of success stories that can be taught to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) identifies six strategies to success in teaching reading comprehension, namely comprehension monitoring, graphic and semantic organisers, questioning, question-answering, question-generating, story structure and summarising.

Reading comprehension strategies are difficult to observe, but strategic behaviours can be observed (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). This implies that teachers must explain to learners why the strategies outlined above will help comprehension. They must demonstrate how to apply the strategy, usually by thinking while reading the text aloud. Thereafter, teachers have to guide and assist learners as they learn how and when to apply the strategy, and help learners practice the strategy until they can apply it independently (Henk, Moore, Marinak & Tomasetti, 2000).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a qualitative design for the enquiry, as we planned to discover, describe, compare, observe and analyse the underlying dimensions of the schools. The qualitative research design is therefore appropriate for this study as it seeks to explore and understand the way teachers give meaning to their understanding of teaching reading comprehension. Transcripts were read and coded initially, compared to the research literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and refined to identify emerging themes. Themes were analysed by returning to the literature and then compared in order to identify similarities and differences in both the themes and the interpretation of data.

### ***Sample***

The data presented in this article are derived from a larger research project undertaken in the Limpopo Province where we employed a case study (Stake, 2000) of three government schools, each with two Grade 3 classes. These learners speak Tshivenda as their mother tongue and at school Tshivenda is the language of teaching and learning. Thus, not all Grade 3 learners and teachers at the schools of the Vhembe district were included in the study. Although the generalisation of results derived from a case study was an anticipated constraint (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:439), we provided a rich description of the case for applicability to other known cases (Seale, 1999).

### ***Procedures***

Prior to the commencement of the study, permission was sought from the participants. The study did include ethical considerations in the form of a signed consent form. The teachers were assured of anonymity and confidentiality as the research did not require their names. Teachers were also given opportunities to clarify their understanding of the study, and to ask questions related to procedures and research activities related to the study.

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### *Data collection instruments*

Data collection instruments used to attempt to answer the study's research question were individual interviews with teachers, focus group interviews, classroom observations and content analysis, each of which are clarified below:

- Individual teacher interviews

The research was conducted at three government schools. Individual interviews with six teachers who participated in the study were conducted. Each school had two Grade 3 classes. These six teachers were all qualified to teach in the Foundation Phase with four of them holding university degrees. Their ages range from forty six to fifty two years and their teaching experience ranged from six to twelve years in teaching in the Foundation Phase. 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

Permission was sought to conduct the research prior to the collection of data from Vhembe District Office. The unions, the participating teachers, the principal and the School Governing Body (SGB) were informed before the commencement of the study. The purpose of the study was discussed. A naturalistic approach was adopted in studying teachers' techniques of teaching reading comprehension in the classroom at several occasions. One lesson observation per week for two months was conducted using an observation schedule adapted from Henk et al., (2000) to suit the context of the study. This gave a total of 24 lessons to be analysed. Classroom observation allowed the researchers to observe what actually happened in the classroom pertaining to reading comprehension over time.

- Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted with the six teachers who participated in the study. Both individual interviews with teachers and focus group interviews were conducted twice after school. Each session lasted no longer than an hour. 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. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The research design and methodology, assisted us in researching the main question: How do teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners?

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1 is about teachers' varied opinions, beliefs and understanding of the concept of reading comprehension and its importance in the lives of learners. The coding system is !T=Individual interviews; FG= Focus group interviews; CO=classroom observations; CA=content analysis.

In Table 1.1 we present a summary of the themes which emerged from data analysis and subsequent categorisation. The information in square brackets is our own.

**Table 1.1: Summary of themes and related categories**

	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
	<p><b>Teachers' varied opinions, beliefs and understanding of reading comprehension</b></p> <p><i>There are two words, [namely reading and comprehension] the reader must read and thereafter comprehend</i></p>	<p><b>Identified roles of both the teacher and the learners</b></p> <p><i>The one who is teaching reading comprehension must be ready, have the love, know his/her learners</i></p>	<p><b>Challenges of teaching reading comprehension</b></p> <p><i>The challenge has been highlighted and this is serious</i></p>
<b>Category</b>	1.1 'Learners should read and understand and be able to apply the information in their daily lives'	2.1 'I explain the strategy first' [before reading comprehension starts]	3.1 'Teaching reading is a challenge'
	1.2 'Learners can read any text and know how to interpret it'	2.2 'I motivate them before' [reading comprehension starts]	3.2 'Reading is not being done across the learning programmes namely Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills'
	1.3 'Able to indicate or see the relevancy of the story they have read with their lives'	2.3 'I do not know if there is any' [reading comprehension strategies]	3.3 'No, Tshivenda do not have guidelines for teaching reading comprehension like step 1, 2, 3 because that is all we want'
	1.4 'Have more deeper knowledge'	2.4 'I just want to indicate what we expect [from learners] or the outcomes of reading comprehension'	3.4 'I think time allocation is a challenge'

**THEME 1: 'THERE ARE TWO WORDS, THE READER MUST READ AND THEREAFTER COMPREHEND'**

Across all the textual data it seemed that teachers understood the concept of reading comprehension and its importance in the lives of their learners. This theme was critically important to the teachers who participated in the study. They understood it and regarded reading comprehension as important during interviews and focus group interviews. Even though they expressed it differently, each of the six respondents explained the importance of teaching reading comprehension to the learners.

What seems to be significant to the study is that the participants of the case study said they had a clear understanding of reading comprehension. Four categories emerged as expansion and explanation of Theme 1 from the interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations.

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***'Learners should read and understand and be able to apply the information in their daily lives'***

The first category of Theme 1 consists of the teachers' views, opinions and expressions of their understanding of how relevant reading comprehension was to the learners. During interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations, teachers seemed to understand that reading comprehension was important.

Teacher 4 from school B highlighted this when she says:

FG/T4-SCH B, Q1: *'I think reading comprehension is important and to read and understand the story is important'*

According to (Dole, 2002), reading for meaning is the main purpose of reading comprehension. Therefore, the respondents believed it is critical that learners must be able to read and understand in order to use the information in their lives.

This was highlighted by teacher 3 from school B:

FG/T3-SCH B, Q1: *'I think the reader who is reading should understand the passage, the authors' purpose; why did the author write this idea, what was the message of the text? What was the idea behind.'*

Understanding is the goal of reading; and if learners read without understanding, then they are not really reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). The participating teachers seemed to be aware that reading comprehension played a significant role in the education of learners. During the individual teachers' interviews, the teachers expressed their understanding of reading comprehension as the ability to read the text with understanding. Teacher 1 from school A, commented:

IT/T1-SCH A, Q1: *'To read and understand written words, a learner must understand'*

Learners should be able to interact with the text and read with understanding. Related references to reading comprehension also emerged from the focus group interviews with teachers. Teacher 6 from school C had this to say:

FG/T6-SCH C, Q1: *'Learners must read, and as they read, they must understand.'*



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From the above statement, it is clear that reading comprehension occurs when a reader reads with the aim of getting meaning from the text. This implies that the purpose of reading is to understand the written text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Chaote and Rakes (2004) suggest that during the process of reading, the reader actively interacts with the print in making sense of the text.

Concerning Theme 1, the teachers held varied opinions, beliefs and understanding of reading comprehension, explaining that the importance of reading comprehension is to assist learners to read with understanding and be able to relate the information to other situations. Teacher 1 from school A, shares her view:

IT/T1-SCH A-Q2: *'Learners need to read and understand and apply it in their daily lives'*

Reading comprehension is an essential life skill that can assist learners in day-to-day activities (DoE, 2008). For this reason, it must be taught for learners to become independent readers (NRP, 2000). It is clear from the above comments that reading comprehension involves cognition, because during reading the learner is required to think and control his/her reading by making use of strategies.

During the individual teachers' interviews and focus group interviews, all six teachers said that they understood the concept of reading comprehension. This was revealed during the interviews and focus group interviews. During classroom observations the emphasis was on the 'doing' part. The teachers would ask learners to do something, for example to summarise, retell or explain, instead of teaching them how to do it, how to summarise or how to predict and why they should do this.

***'Learners can read any text and know how to interpret it'***

It is clear that the teachers understood reading comprehension and that it was a very important aspect to be taught. Teachers must understand that one can interpret the text only if one can read and understand it, because the reader should think as he/she reads and be able to interpret the text on literal, interpretive and evaluative levels (Lyon, 2003).

Across all individual interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations, most of the teachers complained that learners could not read the text and interpret the information on a literal, interpretive and evaluative level. Teaching comprehension strategies may assist learners to know how to interpret the text correctly by using various strategies to understand the text (McGregor, 2007). Therefore, comprehension is a skill that must be taught. The following remark from teacher 2, school B was pertinent:

FG/T2-SCH B, Q2: *'We expect the learner to be able to read and understand the text, explain and interpret what he or she has been reading about'*

The argument here is that understanding is the major concept in reading. Teachers must teach learners how to read and how to understand the text (Lehr & Osborn, 2006). This means that learners should be able to perform the task of reading and understanding the content of the text on different levels.

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To support this view the following remark was made:

FG/T2-SCH B, Q1: *'You cannot explain something which you did not understand; so, that means when you read, you should read with understanding'*

The issue at stake here is that learners have to be taught to read and understand; this continuously came out from the responses of the participants. The next category explains what could happen if learners could read with understanding.

### ***'Able to indicate or see the relevancy of the story they have read with their lives'***

In the context of the study, a person's ability to figure out the relevancy of texts depends largely on the ability to read and understand written words (Lehr, Osborn & Hiebert, 2004). It is therefore imperative to read with understanding and this requires learners' positive attitude towards reading. Consequently, the learners will be able to use the information when needed, because they understood it. This is supported by teacher 2 from school B who said:

FG/T2-SCH B, Q2: *'They should be able to indicate or see the relevancy of the story that they have read, what does it have to do with their lives, what it is, why, the purpose of the text,'*

What is emerging from this category is that comprehension involves interaction between the reader, the text and the context in order to gain meaning (Pearson, 2001). From the responses when learners were able to indicate or see the relevancy of the story, they seemed to be able to compare and evaluate information and indicate what is useful and relevant to them whether or not the story is liked (DoE, 2002).

### ***'Have deeper knowledge about the written words'***

The six participating teachers in the study indicated that reading comprehension was important for assisting learners to read, understand, and therefore have deeper knowledge about written words.

Reading comprehension is what allows the reader to interact with the text in a meaningful way. The following quotes from teacher 2 from school A, serve as evidence of what most teachers indicated as the purpose of teaching reading comprehension:

IT/T2-SCH A: *'Grade 3 learners should be able to read on their own in order to find the meaning of the story'*

Learners need to become independent readers and be able to seek more knowledge. This implies that reading comprehension must be taught and learnt (NRP, 2000).

**THEME 2: 'THE ONE WHO IS TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION MUST BE READY TO TEACH, HAVE THE LOVE, AND KNOW HIS/HER LEARNERS'**

The questions during the individual and focus group interviews that pertained to Theme 2 were: How do teachers teach reading comprehension, and which strategies do teachers use to teach reading comprehension? The teachers answered differently:

***'I explain the strategy first' [before reading comprehension starts]***

Most of the participating teachers seemed to lack understanding of what strategies were. Teacher 5 from school C explained what she did before the start with reading comprehension:

IT/T5-SCH C, Q3:

*'I explain to the learners what to do like what must be done, why the strategy helps and demonstrate how they can apply the strategy independently'*

Teachers must provide a clear explanation of strategies, e.g., strategies that are used before - reading, during-reading and after-reading, stating why they use them, when they use them and what strategies to use (Adler, 2004). Using a variety of strategies is important for attending to learners' individual needs (Rickford, 2001).

Some teachers prefer other methods to assist learners to become independent readers, especially in Tshivenda, as evidenced from teacher 4, from school B.

FGT/T4-SCH B, Q3:

*'Oh, yes the finger-pointing method, that's true especially in Tshivenda, it works'*

Finger pointing is when a learner points at each word during reading. However, it needs monitoring by the teacher to ensure that the learner is truly pointing at the right word and reading it correctly (Uhry, 2002).

From the interviews and focus group interviews, the aspect of comprehension strategies and their use elicited some extensive discussion amongst the teachers. Some seemed to know how to teach reading comprehension and use comprehension strategies; others seemed unsure of how to teach reading comprehension and what the strategies are.

Some teachers regarded motivation as an important factor in reading comprehension. The following expression serves as evidence.

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### ***'I motivate them before' [reading comprehension starts]***

Motivation is the internal force that drives an individual [learner] to move towards the goal after perceiving a plan, (Dole, 2000). The motivation to read is essential for actively engaging learners in the reading process. It is the fuel that lights the fire and keeps it burning (Texas Education Agency, 2002). Bruner (1986) values the role of motivation as important in learning and this can be applied to teaching of reading comprehension. Teacher 2 from school B captured this when she stated:

IT/T2-SCH B, Q3: *'I motivate them before' [reading comprehension starts]*

Some teachers clearly indicated that they did not know about reading comprehension strategies.

### ***'I do not know if there is any' [reading comprehension strategies]***

Strategies are important since they assist learners when the comprehension process breaks down and restores meaning as they read (Dole, 2000). However, participating teachers in the study seemed to lack a theoretical grasp of comprehension strategies. Remarks by teacher 5, from school C were representative in this regard:

IT/T5-SCH C, Q3: *'I do not know what to say, what to name it' [reading comprehension strategies]*

During classroom observations, teachers did not discuss strategies or teach learners strategies for comprehending the text. Dole, (2000) confirm that many primary-grade teachers have not always emphasised comprehension instruction in their curriculum. In a real classroom situation, both constructivist and social constructivist theorists agree that through social interactions with more capable peers, learners develop more sophisticated knowledge and skills.

What the teachers said during interviews and focus group interviews did not come out clearly during the classroom observations. During classroom observations, it was evident that the teachers read the text without explaining the comprehension strategies and their use during reading. Teachers must read aloud to the learners and model good reading behaviour to the learners (Fisher, Frey & Williams, 2002).

### ***'I just want to indicate what we expect or the outcomes of reading comprehension'***

The teachers seemed to be aware of what was expected from them even if it was not happening practically in the classrooms. One participating teacher indicated that they would like to see learners reading with understanding as an end result of teaching reading comprehension. A sample of the messages from teacher 2 of school B illustrates the point:

FG/T2-SCH B, Q3: *'We expect the learner to be able to read and understand the text, explain about what she has been reading about'*

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From the above response, the teacher seemed to know what was expected of the learners. However, contrary to what one might expect, it seemed that this was not happening during classroom observation. This emphasises the fact that it is the responsibility of the teacher to support the learners to ensure that they are able to read and understand the text. Learners must read the text alone, and use a variety of strategies to make meaning (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008).

### **THEME 3: 'THE CHALLENGES HAVE BEEN HIGHLIGHTED AND THIS IS SERIOUS'**

The teachers expressed feelings of concern and fear that instead of improving, the situation has become worse. They seemed to be overwhelmed by challenges they experienced in teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda speaking learners.

#### ***'Teaching reading comprehension is a challenge'***

Reading comprehension is an act of making meaning out of the written word (Paris & Stahl, 2005). The teacher is expected to model good behaviour of reading and teach the learners comprehension strategies. As learners become more capable of performing a task, the guidance can be gradually released (Zimmerman, 1998).

The responses from the teachers about teaching reading comprehension showed their opinions about learners in their classrooms. Teacher 5 from school C had this to say:

FG/T5-SCH C, Q3: *'There are many challenges especially those children who cannot read, we are stressed'*

During the individual interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations, the teachers expressed their unhappiness about the situation. Instead of feeling motivated, they were stressed, confused and frustrated to have learners who were unable to read and understand in their classrooms. The use of the plural 'we' by respondent 5 during the focus group interviews indicates shared feelings which confirm that teaching reading comprehension is indeed a challenge for the teachers.

#### ***'Reading is not done across the Learning Programmes'***

Reading needs practice and practice makes perfect. As they practise, learners learn to use the comprehension strategies correctly (DoE, 2002). It emerged from the study that reading was not done across the learning programmes, hence the low level of reading comprehension amongst the learners.

Some teachers expressed the feeling that the system was failing them and their learners by not providing them with the necessary resources.

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'No, Tshivenda do not have guidelines for teaching reading comprehension like step1, 2, 3 because that is all we want'

It was evident that respondents seemed dissatisfied with what had been provided for them and that the African languages had been neglected. Teachers felt that English language had guidelines to teach reading comprehension '*Teaching Reading in Early Grades* handbook'. The teachers felt there was a need for a Tshivenda guideline written in Tshivenda for Tshivenda teachers to teach reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners. Teacher 4 from school B had this to say:

FG/T4-SCH B, Q3): *'For an English class, yes, but for a Tshivenda teaching, no guidelines'*

The teachers expressed a concern that the guidelines were helpful to the English teacher, but not to a Tshivenda teacher. Teacher 5 from school C shares her view:

FG/T5-SCH C, Q3: *'No, I do not know, but I cannot remember a time when we were given, what to follow, how to teach reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners.'*

It seems the teachers were aware that the handbook *Teaching Reading in Early Grades* provided by the DoE (2008) addresses the teaching of reading comprehension for English-speaking learners and not for the African languages. As a result, the teachers had no guidelines for teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda-speaking learners (Heugh, 2005). Although workshops had been conducted repeatedly, they did not experience a positive outcome.

### ***'I think time allocation is a challenge'***

Concerns were raised regarding the allocated time for teaching reading comprehension to Tshivenda learners. To justify the one hour suggested specifically for reading comprehension daily, teacher 6 from school C states:

FG/T6-SCH C, Q3: *'Reading comprehension has many things, we need more time for reading comprehension, one hour is needed specifically for reading comprehension.'*

The respondent's remark indicates that teacher needed more time for teaching reading comprehension. During reading teachers must read exciting passages to learners, talk about a story briefly and display illustrations.

Table 1.2 provides a summary of this study's findings, support from literature, what was found contradictory to the insights obtained during this study and new insights gained.

**Table 2: Summary of Insights**

<p><b>Findings</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided practice and time to practise comprehension strategies were missing in classrooms.</li> <li>• No guidelines written in Tshivenda exist.</li> <li>• Teachers do not have access to research on the teaching of reading comprehension and rely on their own experience.</li> <li>• Teachers do not teach reading comprehension strategies.</li> <li>• Training teachers to better equip learners for developing and applying reading comprehension strategies to enhance reading comprehension could be linked to learners' achievements.</li> <li>• Reading comprehension cannot just happen; it must be taught and learnt.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners cannot read and understand the text.</li> <li>• They acknowledged that reading comprehension should be taught, but they did not know how.</li> <li>• They expressed their willingness to learn and to attend workshops in order to become competent teachers of reading comprehension.</li> <li>• They requested strategies that would improve the reading comprehension of Tshivenda-speaking learners.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contradictions</b></p>	<p>The teachers said that they knew what reading comprehension was and its importance, but observations showed no commitment to the teaching of reading comprehension, which strategies to use, and when and how to understand the meaning of the text.</p>
<p><b>New Insights</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching reading comprehension was a challenge.</li> <li>• They were frustrated because learners could not read and understand the text, and because they did not know what comprehension strategies were and how to apply them.</li> <li>• Workshops had not been helpful to the Tshivenda teachers.</li> <li>• They are not satisfied with the intervention strategies provided, since it is not helpful to Tshivenda teachers.</li> <li>• They need support and training in the form of observing someone successfully teaching learners how to read and how to use strategies in order to understand the text.</li> </ul>

**CONCLUSION**

Findings of this study revealed that more efforts are needed for assisting teachers to teach reading comprehension, as learners' ability to read a text with understanding depends on many factors. The researchers acknowledge that this is a case study and, as such, it is hard to draw conclusions that can be generalised. However, this study does reflect the state of teaching reading comprehension in the Vhembe district of South Africa and underscores that reading comprehension is poorly taught in these schools, partly because of the lack of theoretical

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knowledge and guidelines for African language teachers (Heugh, 2005). Teachers have an underdeveloped understanding of teaching literacy, reading and writing. Thus, without a clear explanation of proper guidelines and practical support, it is unlikely that teachers will improve their classroom practices.

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