Effective Decodable Text: When, What, and Where It Takes the Reader

by Katherine K. Newman

On the long road from recognizing letters to comprehension of complex texts there is an uphill stretch during which a particular type of reading practice is essential to young readers. As soon as students can recognize the letters of the alphabet and know some of the sounds commonly associated with them, they are ready for systematic instruction in grapheme-phoneme correspondences, often referred to as "spelling-sound relationships," or "phonics" in common parlance. In addition to analyzing words in isolation, students need much practice with text to achieve accurate and automatic word reading. They need to attend to graphemes, not picture clues, and they need to become correct and consistent decoders with decreasing hesitation. Effective decodable text is a major support in this process.

WHAT DECODABLE TEXT IS NOT

Decodable text has been a subject of controversy among educators, so let us first consider what effective decodable text is *not*:

- Decodable text is not beneficial at all stages of learning to read, but at particular stages. Linnea Ehri (2020) has recommended it for 1) the partial alphabetic phase, in which readers know and use some letter sounds, and 2) the full alphabetic phase, at which students demonstrate a more complete knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Kuhn and Stahl (2022) have recommended it for what they termed the "novice" stage. John Shefelbine, author of the foundational skills intervention program *SIPPS*, recommended it for the "simple alphabetic" and "spelling-pattern" stages.
- Decodable text is not predictable text. An example of predictable text might be "I see a dog. I see a blue house. I see a blue car." with each item depicted in an illustration. Readers will rely on the pictures and the repeated pattern; they have no incentive to decode the words.
- Effective decodable text does not include numerous unknown words or phonics elements. Several series of "decodable books" feature a few spellings and/or high-frequency words per book, but not in cumulative fashion. In those books students struggle with too many words that they don't yet have the tools to decode.
- Effective decodable text is not written to conform to a readability formula. Many readability formulas and other methods of measuring text difficulty are based on word length, sentence length, and word commonness. Short words are not necessarily words that the readers know or can figure out, and many high-frequency words may be unknown to readers as yet. Reading formulas can't indicate the appropriate level for individual students.

CRUCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DECODABLE TEXT

A more useful concept of decodable text comprises two characteristics: 1) a significant proportion of phonically regular words, and 2) a significant match of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences to those the reader has been taught (Mesmer, 2001, p. 122). "Regular" here means the most common and consistent relationships. For example, short vowels (as in *red*, *up*, and *lot*), the final-*e* pattern (as in *bake*, *hope*, and *lime*), and some of the complex vowels (such as *ay* in *say*, *ee* in *sheep*, and *oa* in boat) are quite consistent and therefore of high utility to the reader, while other complex but inconsistent vowels like *ei* (as in *their*, *either*, and *reign*) are not.

The second distinguishing characteristic is the lesson-to-text match. Effective decodable text is one piece of a program of systematic decoding instruction in grapheme-phoneme correspondences and high-frequency words. Systematic instruction is based on a deliberate scope and sequence, preferably with phonics introduced according to their utility and practiced in isolation before being encountered in text. The inclusion of high-frequency words, most of them irregular, is essential because of their prevalence in all English text. A strong lesson-to-text match means that at each point in the curriculum the decodable text uses only or primarily the phonics and high-frequency words already taught.

The lesson-to-text match is crucial. It relates to the major goals of decodable text: to help the reader achieve accuracy and automaticity. To derive benefit from practice, students need to be reading at the independent level (98–100% accuracy) or instructional level (95–97%), not at the frustration level (below 90%); a level of 90–94% is borderline frustration. With high accuracy, the student will build automaticity, recognizing high-frequency words quickly and figuring out phonically regular words readily. A text containing more than 10% of words with phonics and high-frequency words not yet taught will most likely be at the student's frustration level. Obstacles decrease correctness and delay automaticity.

ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

In addition to high decodability and lesson-to-text match, effective decodable text has further important characteristics. There needs to be a considerable body of decodable text for practice as readers move through the partial and full alphabetic phases. With a substantial daily selection, the students can practice with repeated readings. A sequenced set of selections allows the teacher to place students in text at their independent or instructional level. The length and complexity of the texts increase throughout the curriculum. As students become more accurate and automatic, more emphasis can be placed on prosody and comprehension.

Decodable text must be subject to the same standards of good writing as other material students encounter in school. Contrary to many current examples of "decodable text," selections must be clear, cohesive, and composed of language that sounds natural. The vocabulary should be within the students' understanding (*dub*, *nag* and *yen* may look easy to decode, but are obstacles for readers who don't know their meanings). The topics must be engaging. The selections must stimulate interest and further curiosity. They must build students' knowledge about the world. Decodable text will be young readers' first experience with "real" reading, in other words, reading text. It should provide the success that leads to further motivation as young readers are initiated into the power and pleasure of reading.

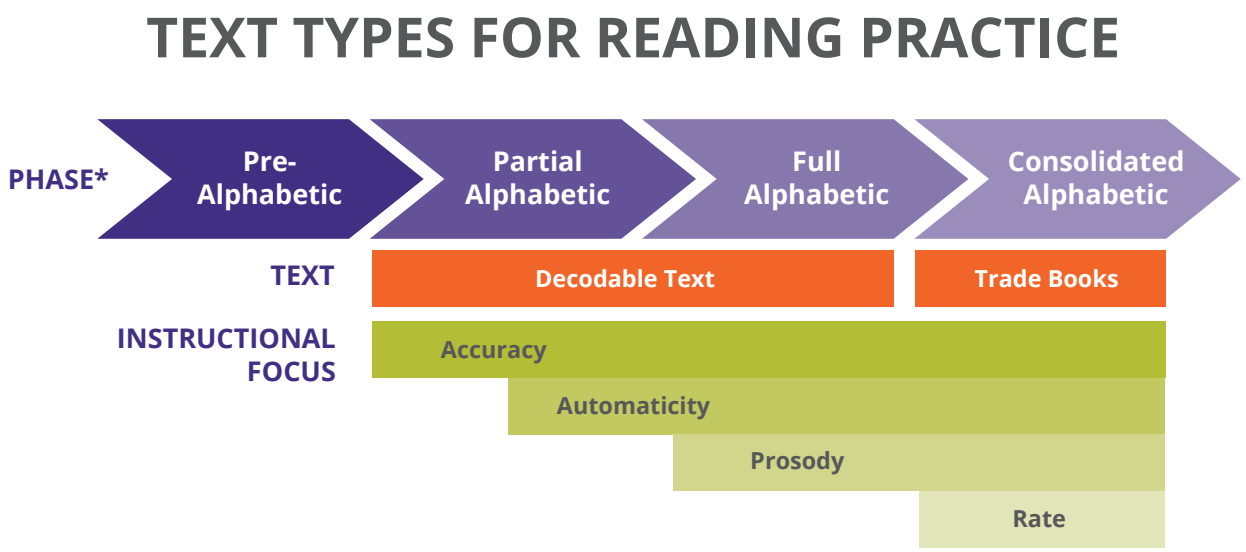
What is needed is "multiple-criteria text" with decodability being one criterion (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). Probably one reason for the paucity of effective multiple-criteria text is the difficulty of writing it. Consider: ample phonically regular words and high-frequency words aligned with the curriculum, a strict limit on material not yet taught, a grade-appropriate topic, clear writing, natural language, cohesive structure, vocabulary within students' knowledge, a suitable informational level, and an engaging treatment—not an easy set of specifications!

IN THE CLASSROOM

Before closing let's take a glance at decodable text in the partial alphabetic phase of learning to read.

> *The teacher asks the students to open their books to the selection that provides practice for the day's lesson in phonics and high-frequency words. The students read the selection either chorally or quietly aloud to themselves, and the teacher asks comprehension questions. Then the students reread today's selection and previous selections quietly aloud to themselves. The teacher circulates, reminding students to take their time—it's better to be correct than fast. The teacher checks the accuracy and rate of a few students each day. If a student's accuracy is at the frustration level on more than one check, the student is directed to practice on earlier selections. A record of reading rate keeps the teacher abreast of each student's progress toward automaticity; students are not pushed to increase their speed at this stage. Time spent on reading practice gradually increases to one half hour daily.*

Decodable text need not be the students' only reading in the partial and full alphabetic phases. Students will benefit from opportunities to select their own reading material. However, daily practice in multiple-criteria decodable text will solidify the knowledge needed to progress to the next phase of development.



*Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S45–S60. doi:10.1002/rrq.334

MOVING ON

How do we know when the students have received the full benefit of decodable text? Students who are consistently accurate in decodable text through short vowels, consonant digraphs and blends, final-*e*, and common complex vowels are ready to move to trade books. They are paying attention to print and decoding many words successfully and quickly. As the teacher directs them to trade books at their independent and instructional levels, readers apply their skills to an expanding range of words. Rate will increase gradually (perhaps quickly) and students will read with better expression and increased comprehension.

A print-rich classroom includes an assortment of appealing topics, genres, and reading levels. Encountering this variety will build the students' knowledge, develop their interests, increase their enjoyment of reading, and serve as a gateway to wide and voluminous reading.

CONCLUSION

In summary, decodable text is fitting for students at a particular stage: when they are learning the common spelling-sound correspondences. High-quality decodable text closely aligned to a scope and sequence of phonics and high-frequency words will lead to the accuracy and automaticity that are the foundation for the next phases of learning to read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine K. Newman earned her BA from Carleton College, MAT from the University of Chicago, and PhD from The Ohio State University. She taught in the Chicago Public Schools, at the University of Houston, and at Sacramento State University. Dr. Newman co-authored *SIPPS* Extension, Challenge, and Plus, as well as *Guided Spelling: Developing Thoughtful Spellers*, Grades 1–6. She has given presentations and workshops on reading instruction and decodable text.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cheatham, J. P., & Allor, J. H. (2012). The influence of decodability in early reading text on reading achievement: A review of the evidence. *Reading & Writing*, *25*(9), 2223–2246. doi:10.1007/s11145-011-9355-2

In reviewing studies on the effectiveness of decodable text, the authors provide a persuasive rationale. The goal: "for the reader to unitize (i.e., recognize automatically or by sight) the words being learned" (p. 2226). The studies reviewed used different methods of measuring decodability; nevertheless, they showed generally positive results for using decodable text in the partial and full alphabetic phases. Multiple-criteria text is needed, for which decodability is just one characteristic.

Donovan, C. A., Smolkin, L. B., & Lomax, R. G. (2000). Beyond the independent-level text: Considering the reader—text match in first graders' self-selections during recreational reading. *Reading Psychology*, *21*(4), 309–333. doi:10.1080/027027100750061949

In this modest but telling study, first graders selected books for their reading practice. Those with low reading ability chose 77% of their books above their reading level, in other words, at their frustration level; students with average reading ability, 61%.

Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *55*, S45–S60. doi:10.1002/rrq.334

A major researcher summarizes decades of her work and the knowledge it has contributed to the understanding of reading development. She reviews her theory of four phases of development in learning to read words: pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, and consolidated, with the content and type of instruction essential to each.

Five From Five (2023). What are decodable books and why are they important? Reading Rockets, WETA Public Broadcasting. https://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-are-decodable-books-and-why-are-they-important

The authors discuss 1) the need for decodable text, 2) its characteristics, 3) common and valid criticisms of decodable text, and 4) criteria for high-quality decodable text. Criteria include a match to phonics instruction, numerous words with the target grapheme-phoneme correspondences, and a minimum of words with spellings not yet taught.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY *(continued)*

Hasbrouck, J. (2006). Drop everything and read—but how? For students who are not yet fluent, silent reading is not the best use of classroom time. *American Educator*, *30*(2).

For struggling basic readers oral reading is more effective at promoting fluency than silent reading. Hasbrouck shows how teachers can measure prosody, rate, and accuracy efficiently and reliably. She suggests rereadings and oral practice with corrections and guidance. She cautions against stressing rate prior to accuracy.

Hasbrouck, J., & Tindal, G. A. (2006). Oral reading fluency norms: A valuable assessment tool for reading teachers. *Reading Teacher*, *59*(7), 636–644. doi:10.1598/RT.59.7.3

Words correct per minute (WCPM) has been shown "to serve as an accurate and powerful indicator of overall reading competence" (p. 636). The authors compiled reading rate norms from a large number of students. For first graders in Winter, the norm at the 50th percentile was 23 WCPM, and in Spring, 53 WCPM in grade-level unpracticed passages. Scores are useful in screening, diagnosis, monitoring progress, and measuring outcomes. The authors consider below 90% accuracy at the frustration level.

Honig, B., Diamond, L., Gutlohn, L, & Cole, C. (2018). *Teaching reading sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Oakland, CA: CORE.

This guide provides the theory and practice of effective reading instruction. Pages 183–184 include a summary of the features of decodable text and instructions for teachers to measure easily the decodability levels of student reading material.

Kuhn, M. R., & Stahl, K. A. D. (2022). Teaching reading: Development and differentiation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *103*(8), 25–31.

The authors describe four stages of reading development: emergent, novice, transitional, and post-transitional. Novice readers need significant time reading connected text with ample support, including decodable text. Text should be provided at the upper end of a student's instructional level, identified by the authors as 85–90% accuracy.

Mesmer, H. A. (2001). Decodable text: A review of what we know. *Reading Research & Instruction*, *40*(2), 121–141.

"Researchers have defined decodability by the presence of two primary features, 1) a proportion of words with phonically regular relationships between letters and sounds, and 2) a degree of match between the letter/sound relationships represented in text and those that the reader has been taught" (p. 122). Mesmer summarizes various attempts to measure regularity of grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Researchers have disagreed on the percent of lesson-to-text match that would be ideal. In the appropriate phases—the partial and full alphabetical—decodable text supports students in word identification, applying phonics lessons, and paying attention to letters and sounds.

Mesmer, H. A. (2005). Text decodability and the first-grade reader. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 21*(1), 61–86. doi:10.1080/10573560590523667

Early first graders in the partial alphabetic phase were given 14 phonics lessons. One group practiced in decodable text that was strongly correlated with the lessons. This group read with higher accuracy and depended less on the examiners for assistance.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY *(continued)*

Mesmer, H. A., Cunningham, J. W., & Hiebert, E. H. (2012). Toward a theoretical model of text complexity for the early grades: Learning from the past, anticipating the future. *Reading Research Quarterly, 47*(3), 235–258. doi:10.1002/RRQ.019

The authors urge publishers of text for beginning readers to look beyond any single focus and consider the multiple factors that affect text complexity. Among these are phonic complexity, word commonness, sound/spelling regularity and some that are less commonly attended to, such as whether word meanings are known by the students, "imageability" (whether a word evokes a mental picture), and overall cohesiveness. Other factors are also discussed.

Rasinski, T., & Hamman, P. (2010). Fluency: Why it is "not hot." *Reading Today, 28*(1), 26.

Average elementary reading rates rose from 2004 to 2009, with the Grade 1 Spring rate at the 50th percentile from 50 words correct per minute to 61, but there was not a corresponding increase in overall reading achievement. The authors warn against prioritizing reading speed at the expense of prosody and comprehension.

Wolf, M. (2007). *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*. New York: HarperCollins.

Maryanne Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist and researcher in reading and dyslexia, gives readers a fascinating book about how the brain evolved to read and how it functions during reading. In learning to read much experience is necessary to develop the several parts of the brain and the connections among them.