

# The role of decodable texts in learning to read

In response to the July 2021 announcement that all NSW Foundation classrooms had received a delivery of decodable texts, **Jocelyn Seamer** published a timely blog on the use of decodable texts on her site [www.jocelynseamereducation.com](http://www.jocelynseamereducation.com). She has provided a summary of that blogpost for publication in this issue of the *LDA Bulletin*.

**A**lthough it is now widely accepted that decodable texts of one sort or another are a key part of a systematic approach to reading instruction, their use often generates heated debate. It is important to explore the what, when, who and how of decodables in learning to read.

## What are decodable texts?

Decodable texts are simple texts that contain limited graphemes and irregular high frequency words so that students are only asked to read material that they can sound out. There is no guessing, no looking at pictures and no 'thinking about what makes sense' to lift the words from the page when reading decodable texts.

Decodables sometimes get a bad rap being labelled as impoverished, boring and as encouraging 'barking at print' without any attention being paid to other skills of reading. Let's be clear. The earliest decodables aren't rich literature. They aren't meant to be. The primary role of these early texts is to help children get runs on the board and develop the beginnings of fluency at the

basic sentence level. When we begin to play football, we don't just start playing in a professional side where the game is fast and complex, and we are in real danger of injury. As children, we play a modified game and attend training sessions to learn fundamental skills. It's the same with reading. We can't just throw children in the deep end with books containing the whole alphabetic code and complex sentences and think that they'll 'pick it up'. We need to carefully scaffold experiences through decodable texts to allow children to experience success at each phase of the reading acquisition process. This approach, working from simple to complex, prevents cognitive overload and ensures that children's attention remains focused on the internal structure of the word rather than trying to remember words based on global shapes; an approach we now know is flawed (Dehaene, 2020). It also focuses students on blending all through the word instead of using other 'cues' to lift the words from the page, such as contextual or linguistic cues that yield much poorer results for weak readers (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Decodable texts are not all 'the cat sat on the mat'. Quality decodables contain dialogue, a range of sentence structures, rich vocabulary and engaging story lines. There are, of course, poorer quality decodable texts that do not. Just as with any text, we need to be discerning in our choices and use the best quality texts we can access.

## When do we need to provide decodable texts?

I could say 'in the early years', but that would assume that all children learn to read in the first three years of school. So instead, I'm going to say, 'Until they have learned the core 75 graphemes of the alphabetic code (Eide, 2011) and are reading at approximately 70-90 words per minute'. Now, that doesn't mean that we have to hold off giving students a variety of sentence structures, rich vocabulary and engaging story lines. It simply means that until students have reached the important milestones

mentioned above, we need to be very mindful that we aren't putting students in the position of having to guess in order to decode. That means that if a student is 10 years old and reading at a rate of 45 words per minute, they would likely benefit from practice with decodable texts. If they are 7 years old, have knowledge of the full code and are reading at 110 words per minute, it's time to move on. The supply of decodable texts is not about age, it's about reading development.



## Who needs decodable texts?

The short answer is 'everyone'. The long answer is a little more complex. While all children move through the same phases of development in learning to read (Moats, 2020), they do so at different rates and with different levels of ease. My own observations of students have led me to develop four categories of students.

- 1 The 'Easy Peasy Lemon Squeezy' Students.** These learners seem to acquire reading without difficulty or too much instruction.
- 2 The Average Children.** These are students who seem to cope with a broad range of instruction in reading. While they benefit greatly from a systematic approach (and it will certainly accelerate and strengthen learning), they do make progress with sight word lists and predictable texts. They will find it easier to build strong foundational skills with decodable texts, but predictable texts aren't the end of the world for them. After all, this is how the argument, "But balanced literacy works fine" has held on for so long.
- 3 The Vulnerable Readers.** With almost 20% of year 9 students not meeting minimum requirements for NAPLAN in writing and 10% not

meeting minimum standards in reading (ACARA, 2021), it's clear to see that a large proportion of our students fall into this category. While 'average' children appear to be okay with balanced literacy, the vulnerable readers are not. These students may not have a diagnosable reading difficulty, but being taught three-cueing strategies with predictable texts is an impediment to them becoming proficient readers and they end up reaching the upper primary years of school 'behind' or 'struggling'. Characteristics of this group in their early stages of learning to read may include:

- Slow development of effective blending. They may take a long time to develop beyond decoding sound by sound.
- Reading rate may be very slow and significantly affect comprehension.
- Many more exposures may be needed to learn to develop phoneme-grapheme correspondence (letter sound knowledge).
- Weaker working memory.
- 'Immature' spoken grammar.
- Becoming discouraged very easily. Being reluctant to read at all.
- Knowing how to read a word on one page, but not the next (beyond what is normal at the very early stages of reading).
- Having difficulty recalling graphemes to write them down.

Without systematic, explicit teaching of phonics and reading, these students are at real risk of reading failure. Vulnerable readers require decodable texts right through the reading instruction process. I have observed that asking vulnerable readers to read less controlled texts too early results in a definite backward-tracking in reading rate and comprehension. As soon as the students cannot easily decode the words, they resort to guessing. Decodables are required until full confidence with the alphabetic code develops.

#### 4 Students with a reading difficulty.

These students will present with some (or all) of the characteristics of vulnerable readers, but will struggle significantly to acquire fundamental skills. Predictable texts

are a disaster for these students, who require a systematic approach for a longer period of time than their peers, delivered with greater intensity and skill.

Just as these four groups of children have different learning needs, they also have a different 'relationship' with decodable texts. The challenge for teachers is that we can't tell which student will fall into which category when we meet them. It is easy to make assumptions based on factors such as how verbal a student is, how confident they are, a student's socioeconomic background or the profession of their parents. Conducting a quick risk/benefit analysis shows us that it is a reasonable proposition to simply provide decodable texts to every student. Nobody is disadvantaged by the practice and all students are advantaged by receiving a strong, systematic approach right from the start.

### How to use decodable texts

Decodable texts (either physical books, digital books or sentences/passages printed on A4 paper) can be a part of every student's reading instruction.

While I explained in the previous section that one size does not fit all, that doesn't mean that some children don't need decodables. Students need access to the right decodables for their stage of reading development, so confining students to texts simply because they match their grade level isn't effective practice. It's also not effective practice to simply 'hand out' any old decodable texts and say, "Look, we have decodables!". Texts need to be carefully matched to the phonics being learned at the time, but only after a student has developed automaticity with the graphemes contained in the book. So, if you were learning to read the graphemes 'ay', 'ee', 'igh', the decodables you read as you learn them probably wouldn't contain too many words with these graphemes. Instead, you would practise these graphemes at word and simple sentence level until you have automaticity and *then* you read longer decodables that contain them. The choice of decodables in instruction needs to be targeted and intentional.

Providing decodables does not mean that children don't have access to any other books. In fact, I'm a huge advocate for supporting children to spend time with any old book they want to, but that doesn't mean they have to decode them themselves. Children need

to develop a sense of themselves and their relationship with books. If they want to borrow *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* from the school library and look at the pictures, sounding out the occasional word, let them. If they want to have a go at reading *Billy B Brown* or a picture book, don't interfere. If they are an 'easy peasy lemon squeezy' or 'average' student with a sound knowledge of the complex code, there's a good chance they'll be able to decode the book, and all will be well. If a book is too hard, the student will soon choose something else. If it's their own free-choice time, let them have free choice and of course, continue reading to children for as long as you can. What I'm describing is low-stakes, no-pressure personal time with books. It's not instruction. Instruction requires texts that are intentionally and carefully matched to a student's current needs to enable students to build skills to mastery.

The use of decodables, as with any aspect of teaching, is nuanced and complex. The easy bit is knowing that decodable texts will accelerate reading acquisition for all students if used correctly. The harder bit is appropriately adjusting instruction to meet the needs of the children in your class.

### References

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*Jocelyn Seamer is a teacher, tutor and former school leader. She has led teams in some of Australia's remotest schools to develop practice that reflects the evidence base of reading instruction. She shares simple yet effective strategies with classroom teachers in a variety of forums – see <https://www.jocelynseamereducation.com>. Her book, *Reading Success in the Early Primary Years*, is due for release in late 2022.*