

Why are some schools in England in such a muddle about allocating reading books?

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Decodable reading books are part of our toolkit when supporting our children to become proficient readers. Recently, there has been extensive funding available to enable schools to implement them in schools, as part of their approach to systematic synthetic phonics. However, I have become deeply concerned about the allocation of decodable reading books across some schools so thought I would spend some time unpicking possible explanations and mixed messages.

After numerous months, I think I have discovered some causes of the confusion!

- Schools are clear that a child's decodable reading book should have the grapheme-phoneme correspondences in it that they know. In addition to this, common exception words may be introduced in the book or taught previously.
- Schools are aware that their decodable reading books have to align with the school's phonics programme so they can match books closely to a child's knowledge of GPCs and exception words.
- The main challenge is a myth/concept that the books must be matched at '90%/95% fluency.'

This last point is a growing trend and something that concerns me, especially as it has become a challenge in some Ofsted inspections I have been linked with. Therefore, I have spent some time looking back to where this concept came from and if it is backed by research.

My Summary

-Has Ofsted's focus on *90%/95% fluency* (when they mean *automaticity*) come from their training? Has someone trained Ofsted inspectors that the *90% fluency* (when they mean *automaticity*) is vital and yet I am unable to find research that supports this? Neither can I find any references within Ofsted's own material. There is nothing in the *DfE Reading Framework* either.

-Could someone have misinterpreted the original evidence for 'instructional level' due to the *Reading Rockets* article (2. *An introduction to fluency*) in an attempt to simplify things? It looks like the grid could have been translated into something else. It's clear that research or guidance about 'instructional level' shows we also need to consider vocabulary and level of comprehension. It's also clear that the information about instructional level was mainly aimed at any reading books and not directed at 'decodable reading book' or early readers. Lots of information about texts at an instructional level referred to readers being able to gain information from the text. Has the idea of *10% errors* simply been shifted to *10% sounding and blending words* and this has been potentially relayed in some way to Ofsted? I am unable to find research that supports this. On the contrary, renowned literacy specialist and advisor, Tim Shanahan, dispels the original 'instructional level' idea raised by Betts.

-To supplement this, there is evidence to show that a child may learn a word in a list but might not then read it in a text. This is the key idea behind those who think children should have a book that they can read with 90%+ accuracy and automaticity (they would say *fluency*). They expect the child to do amazing learning in phonics and then transfer it to books. I believe it's unlikely to happen for lots of children, particularly those who find learning to read difficult. 1. They need lots of repeated

efforts at sounding and blending before recognising words by sight. 2. It's impossible to find and utilise enough words found in reading books, for ample practice within phonics lessons. Simply compare two reading books and see the range of vocabulary within them to see my point.

-Beginner readers need practice time. Through practice they will develop confidence and far more: knowledge of vocabulary, orthographic mapping, and eventually fluency, if the correct feedback/instruction is provided. The evidence above supports this. When working with schools, it's important that I support teachers to focus on providing the right type of practice as required.

-There is a noticeable *fear factor* around teachers allocating decodable texts, resulting in some children not getting worded books as they '*can't read with 90% automaticity*'. I met numerous children in Reception, during the spring term, who still had a wordless book. Instead of doing this, I ask schools to focus on growing the child's knowledge of the GPCs, useful exception words and helping the child to develop the skill of blending. We know that children will succeed with effective support from an adult. Research shows that children can benefit from a book at frustration level when supported by an adult (one to one). Therefore, the focus must be on training adults to provide the best strategies and guidance to enable children to thrive and not inadvertently hold them back from developing their full capacity to become a reader.

-Also, when allocating decodable reading books, there isn't a single bit of evidence that states the books have to be produced by the same publisher as the school's core phonics programme. Simply, we need to know that the child has the knowledge and skills to be able to read the books and that the words in the books 'closely' match the GPCs and exception words previously learnt.

-It's important that we provide books so that children can apply their alphabetic code knowledge and feel like readers. When we've done that, we have to focus on ourselves – are own knowledge and skills. Does our support and guidance enable progress? Practice (a child reading books) is most effective if it is supplemented with specific and effective feedback. We also know that the adult supporting the child needs much more than this: a smile, a passion for reading, an interest in the book, a willingness and ability to discuss the content, someone who can model expert reading...and much more.

-Teachers require clarity and this should be provided in their professional training and not inadvertently undermined by misinformation or misperceptions by schools' advisors or even Ofsted inspectors during school inspections.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. Below, you will find a trail of my reading and thinking. If you have any thoughts about this content, please email info@theliteracyadvisor.co.uk

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The Literacy Advisor

1.Ofsted-Education Inspection framework: Overview of research.

"The evidence therefore states that children need to be taught: v phonemic awareness (the sounds that make up words such as c/a/t) v the sound–spelling relationships in words v how to say the sounds that make up

words and to do this by: v using texts that are made up of words that use the sound–spelling relationships children have learned” Pg 26

“Fluency is an important contributor to reading comprehension, after children have achieved secure knowledge of phonics. Fluent readers can read quickly, accurately and with appropriate stress and intonation, which aids comprehension by freeing pupils’ cognitive resources to focus on meaning.” Pg 27

2. Fluency: An Introduction-Reading Rockets article-Partnership for reading (2001) This website content was formed from the document referenced below in 4.

The difference between fluency and automaticity

Although the terms *automaticity* and *fluency* often are used interchangeably, they are not the same thing.

Automaticity is the fast, effortless word recognition that comes with a great deal of reading practice. In the early stages of learning to read, readers may be accurate but slow and inefficient at recognizing words. Continued reading practice helps word recognition become more automatic, rapid, and effortless.

Automaticity refers only to accurate, speedy word recognition, not to reading with expression. Therefore, automaticity (or automatic word recognition) is necessary, but not sufficient, for fluency.

Fluency instruction

Fluency is not a stage of development at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes, depending on what readers are reading, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text. Even very skilled readers may read in a slow, laboured manner when reading texts with many unfamiliar words or topics. For example, readers who are usually fluent may not be able to read technical material fluently, such as a textbook about nuclear physics or an article in a medical journal.

It is important to note that fluency instruction should be with a text that a student can read at their independent level. It is at this level where students are able to practise on speed and expression rather than decoding. The chart below describes each reading level:

Independent Level	Relatively easy for the student to read (95% word accuracy).
Instructional Level	Challenging but manageable for the reader (90% word accuracy).
Frustration Level	Difficult text for the student to read (less than 90% word accuracy).

3. Ofsted Research and analysis: Research review series: English July 2022

“To develop fluency, children need repeated practice.”

4. The research building blocks for teaching children to read-Put Reading First. National Institute for literacy-

The Partnership for reading

“Fluency develops gradually over considerable time and through substantial practice. At the earliest stage of reading development, students’ oral reading is slow and labored because students are just learning to “break the code”—to attach sounds to letters and to blend letter sounds into recognizable words.” Pg 19

“Although some readers may recognize words automatically in isolation or on a list, they may not read the same words fluently when the words appear in sentences in connected text. Instant or automatic word recognition is a necessary, but not sufficient, reading skill. Students who can read words in isolation quickly may not be able to automatically transfer this “speed and accuracy.” It is important to provide students with instruction and practice in fluency as they read connected text.” Pg 20.

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Pg 20.

“Having students review and rehearse word lists (for example, by using flash cards) may improve their ability to recognize the words in isolation, but this ability may not transfer to words presented in actual texts. Developing reading fluency in texts must be developed systematically.” Pg 27.

5. This article [corrective-reading-independent-instructional-frustrational-reading-levels.pdf](#)

[\(mheducation.com\)](#) refers to the 95% and ‘instructional’ but it’s about errors. See the dialogue about how you determine is a text is appropriate. E.g. 200 words read. 12 errors so 188 correct=94% Nothing about automatic 95%.

6. Shannahan on literacy blog [Independent Reading Levels | Shanahan on Literacy](#)

“Betts’ surmised that level of difficulty was the key. On the one hand, if students could read a book well already, there wouldn’t be much opportunity to improve with that. And, if a book was especially hard then they might be discouraged or overwhelmed and that could undermine improvement, too. The trick, according to Betts, was to figure out which texts were in that sweet spot for a given student. His conclusion was that kids would do best if placed in text they could read the words with 95-98% accuracy and with 75-89% comprehension. That’s the scheme I learned early in my teaching career, and all these years later it is the scheme widely recommended by many reading authorities and programs.

My problem with that plan is two-fold. The way Betts chose those criteria (the 95-98%) was nonsensical and more recent studies have shown that matching kids to books like that doesn’t provide learning advantages. In other words, he did it wrong and it doesn’t work” Talking about the origins of 95% and instructional level.

7. Little Wandle Letters and Sounds, in FAQs and a Tweet, stated Ofsted have been trained to check books are allocated at ‘90% fluency.’ I therefore emailed them to ask for evidence and the literature that shows Ofsted check this. Their response only directed me to the Reading Rockets page [Fluency: An Introduction | Reading Rockets](#) (evidence 2.)

8. My school visits experience.

Among many of my visits to schools, there is a fear factor amongst staff. I’ve come across numerous examples of worded books not being allocated to children in Reception as they can’t instantly read them with “90% fluency.” When I unpick this with them they don’t mean fluency. They mean that a child has to sound and blend more than 10% of the words. Therefore, some children have been left on wordless books and cannot move forward.

I believe the key challenge is having up to date assessment knowledge and allocating books according to the findings. Too often children have been left to guess words and they do not know how to read the exception words in the book and/or the adults do not know how to support well enough. GPCs have generally been checked.

9. Determining reading levels of texts -Fluency handout [Determining Reading Levels of Texts](#) ([firstliteracy.org](#))

Again ‘independent’ refers to no more than approximately 1 in 20 words ‘is difficult for the reader.’ (no mention of needing to sound and blend them)

It does identify that a child can have a book at their frustration level: “Instructional 90% for small group when teachers provide assistance as students read. Frustration-level texts can be used when extensive support and instruction are provided by the teacher during one-on-one instruction.”

10. What is the difference between independent and instructional reading level? [Dr. Walshire's Website / Independent vs. Instructional Reading \(antioch34.com\)](#)

-Again, instructional references 90-95% percent accuracy and “at least 80 percent comprehension on simple questions about the story.”

Here we understand the original idea of what was meant by an instructional text. It links to the idea of comprehension too and not just word reading.

11. Tim Shanahan Reading Rockets article [New Evidence on Teaching Reading at Frustration Levels | Reading Rockets](#)

“Unfortunately, this insightful plan (that many of us have used in our classrooms) was just made up. In today’s parlance, the instructional level is “fake news.” No one bothered to do studies to determine whether that kind of book matching was beneficial to kids or not!”

“But it wasn’t until 2000 when anyone even bothered to examine the value of the instructional level using a randomized control trial. Then things got really interesting, since those studies found either that it made no difference — in terms of reading achievement — whether kids were matched to texts at their so-called instructional level, or the frustration level kids far outperformed the instructional level ones. In other words, it was either a waste of time to match kids to books or it was hurting kids!”

He very much goes into the comprehension side of things too like evidence 10.

12. Ofsted inspection framework: The School Inspection handbook 241-245

Within the inspection handbook, there is nothing about ‘Instructional level’, 90% 95% etc.

Early stages of learning to read

241. During all inspections, inspectors will be interested in how the school supports pupils who are at the early stages of learning to read, including older pupils. This is especially the case because of the disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

242. On inspections of infant, junior, primary and lower-middle schools, inspectors will carry out a deep dive to evaluate how well pupils are taught to read. They will pay particular attention to pupils who are reading below age-related expectations (the lowest 20%) to assess how well the school is teaching phonics and supporting all children to become confident, fluent readers. This will include understanding how reading is taught remotely, where applicable.

243. Inspectors will listen to several low-attaining pupils in Years 1 to 3 read from unseen books that are appropriate to their stage of progress. They should also draw on information from the school’s policy for teaching reading, phonics assessments, phonics screening check results and lesson visits.

244. Wherever possible, inspectors will listen to children read to a familiar adult in a classroom or in an open area that the pupils are familiar with. They will take into consideration the length of time a pupil has attended the school.

245. In reaching an evaluation against the ‘quality of education’ judgement, inspectors will consider whether:

- the school is determined that every pupil will learn to read, regardless of their background, needs or abilities. All pupils, including the weakest readers, make sufficient progress to meet or exceed age-related expectations
- stories, poems, rhymes and non-fiction are chosen for reading to develop pupils' vocabulary, language comprehension and love of reading. Pupils are familiar with and enjoy listening to a wide range of stories, poems, rhymes and non-fiction
- the school's phonics programme matches or exceeds the expectations of the national curriculum and the EYFS early learning goals. The school has clear expectations of pupils' phonics progress term by term, particularly from Reception to Year 2
- the sequence of reading books shows a cumulative progression in phonics knowledge that is matched closely to the school's phonics programme. Teachers give pupils sufficient practice in reading and re-reading books that match the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they know, both at school and at home
- reading, including the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, is taught from the beginning of Reception
- the ongoing assessment of pupils' phonics progress is sufficiently frequent and detailed to identify any pupil who is falling behind the programme's pace. If they do fall behind, targeted support is given immediately
- the school has developed sufficient expertise in the teaching of phonics and reading

13. DfE Reading Framework

Again, nothing about '90%', instructional level

"However, practising to gain automaticity in decoding needs to focus on accuracy. This means children must first work out a word by sounding and blending. Most of them have to do this several times before they can read it accurately 'at a glance'. Re-reading a text, therefore, gradually increases the number of words in it that they can read 'at a glance'" Pg 58

"Teachers rarely have the time to listen to children reading individually. However, if they did, the teacher could choose a book closely matched to the GPCs the child knew, and the number of words the child would be likely to be able to read 'at a glance'. The teacher would start by showing interest in the book, connecting it to something the child knew about or had read before. The teacher would expect the child to sound out unfamiliar words and would praise them for doing so. The teacher might re-read a sentence or a page to the child to help them keep track of what was going on and explain the meaning of a word in the 83 Wolf M and Katzir-Cohen T (2001). 'Reading fluency and its intervention' Scientific Studies of Reading: volume 5, issue 3, pages 211-239 60 context of the story. Sometimes they might re-read sections together." Pg 59.

14. How has the misconception about 90% 'fluency' got out there? Obviously via Ofsted inspections but look at the following:

[Song of Sounds - Decodable Reading Books](#) "The aim is 90% fluency - this means children should only need to decode one word in ten, the rest should be fluent."

An English Hub doc online (errors in it) [download.asp\(kingsnorth.kent.sch.uk\)](http://download.asp(kingsnorth.kent.sch.uk)) "Books should be matched to the children's secure phonic knowledge, so they can at 90%+ fluency – enabling them to transfer and apply their phonic knowledge." (Has this come from the Little Wandle Guidance stated below as the wording is similar?)

A school using LW [Phonics and Reading – Nine Mile Ride Primary School, Finchampstead, Wokingham](#)

“Texts from a range of genres and publishers are matched by phonics phases and colour reading band to ensure children are reading at 90% fluency.” Here book bands are also referenced.

And in the Little Wandle guidance: Application of Phonics to reading- “Children should be able to read the matched level of books at 90%+ fluency – so they can transfer and apply their phonic knowledge whilst reading the book.” Is this the source of where teachers are conflating the notions of ‘*accuracy*’ and ‘*fluency*’?

15. Book banded books still shared and connected to 90% 95%. This causes further confusion for schools. Hampshire learning services English team guidance Sep 2020 [HIAS Phonic Readers and Book Band Guidance.pdf \(hants.gov.uk\)](https://www.hants.gov.uk/hias-phonics-reading-guidance)