PrimTEd Teaching Reading Study Guides

Study guide 4:

Reading Fluency

Primary Teacher Education project
Department of Higher Education and Training

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Contents

Introduction to reading fluency

How do children learn to read fluently?

To be effective readers children have to learn to read fluently, at an appropriate pace with accuracy and expression. This study guide examines what reading fluency involves and how it can be developed and assessed by the literacy teacher. Particular attention is given to assessing oral reading fluency (ORF).

What this study guide contains

This guide has five units:

1. The meaning of fluency

2. Fluency instruction

3. Assessing fluency – oral reading fluency norms

4. Assessing fluency – oral reading fluency benchmarks

5. Measuring oral reading fluency in practice

What literacy teacher standards does this study guide cover?

This study guide covers three standards, one relating to knowledge of fluency and two standards relating to the practical development and assessment of fluent reading.

Knowledge

14.   Demonstrates knowledge of how to develop fluency in reading through a flexible use of strategies.

14.1 An understanding of the role of fluency in relationship to vocabulary, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, comprehension and text difficulty can be demonstrated.

14.2 Taking into account the relationship of fluency to the other components of literacy and the variety of texts used, flexible fluency benchmarks for the particular grade and language are stated.

14.3 Strategies which will help learners to develop fluency in reading in a variety of genres are described.

14.4 Appropriate texts are chosen so that learners can independently comprehend them as tasks become more complex and the text demands increase.

Practice

3.   Implement multimodal forms of instruction and evaluate instructional practice in each of the key components of reading and writing.

3.1 Implement in a structured, integrated and phase appropriate way, and evaluate instructional practice in the following key areas: ... fluency

5.   Demonstrate an understanding of the range of types and multiple purposes of assessment in literacy, including for selection (screening), diagnosis, guidance, grading, prediction, motivation and standard maintaining.

5.3 Assessment is undertaken in each of the following areas: ... fluency

The detailed standards can be found in the document:
https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/standards/literacy-teacher-standards/literacy-teacher-standards-2020-1.pdf

1. The meaning of fluency

What is reading fluency?

A fluent reader is able to read aloud a connected text at a good (conversational) pace, accurately and with meaningful expression. The reader is able to decode the familiar words in the text automatically and is able to decode words not seen before. Accurate, well paced reading with appropriate expression should sound like spoken language.

Fluency is the bridge between **word recognition** and **comprehension** (in which meaning is gained from what is read). Fluent readers can recognize a high percentage of words automatically.

The components of reading fluency

The key terms for understanding the components of reading fluency are pace, accuracy, expression (or prosody), and automatic decoding.

Pace is the speed at which something moves or happens. Pace is usually stated as how many units of time it takes for the number of operations or steps to be done. So one can say, "I read at a pace of one minute for every 250 words." Note that the terms pace, **rate** and **speed** are often used interchangeably. The speed at which a text is read should be appropriate. In other words it is at an appropriate pace. The pace should not be too slow or too fast.

Accuracy refers to reading words without mistakes, that what is read conforms to the letter-sound conventions of printed text. Decoding and prosody should have a high degree of accuracy. Without accurate decoding and word recognition the reader cannot get the writer's intended meaning.

Prosody is the use of expression and phrasing when reading aloud. Prosodic features are stress patterns (syllable prominence) [in English], phrasing (reading groups of words), variations in pitch (intonation), and duration (length of time) that contribute to expressive reading of a text that is, reading the text naturally and with ease, using pauses between phrases, sentences and paragraphs to reflect natural spoken language. Good prosody means that the reader:

- gives the right emphasis on appropriate words and phrases.

- raises or lowers the voice at appropriate points in the text.

- changes in the pitch or loudness of the voice (inflexion) so that it reflects the punctuation in the text.

- pauses in harmony with the punctuation and conjunctions.

- for narrative text the appropriate tone is used to represent the characters' mental states such as anger, joy, sadness, fear.

word recognition: the ability to recognise a written word correctly and virtually effortlessly without consciously decoding the individual letters or guessing what the word is

comprehension: the understanding and interpretation of what is read. Reading comprehension is the ability to read text, process it, and understand its meaning. Therefore, to be able to accurately understand written material, children need to be able to (1) decode what they read; (2) make connections between what they read and what they already know; and (3) think deeply about what they have read.

rate: a measurement of one quantity or frequency against another quantity or measure, e.g. "I was paid at a rate of 20 rands for an hour of work."

speed: how fast something moves or happens. It is the rate at which something moves or happens. Speed is usually measured in units of distance per unit of time (e.g. "I read at a speed of 300 words a minute and run 10 kilometres in a hour.") whereas pace is measured in units of time per unit of distance (e.g. a second per word).

Decoding is the application of knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly sound-out and pronounce written words. Understanding these relationships gives a learner the ability to read familiar words quickly and to figure out words they haven't seen before. The learner has to be able to decode the words with a high degree of automaticity except for difficult unknown words.

Automaticity: refers to the ability to recognise words instantly without having to sound them out or think about them.

Although the terms automaticity and fluency are often used interchangeably, they are not the same thing. Automaticity is necessary for reading fluency but is only one of the required enablers of fluency.

Clearly, fluency is also influenced by the readers' vocabulary, knowledge of syntax, and familiarity with the subject matter of speech and texts.

Fluency as a critical factor in comprehension

Fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for successful reading comprehension (Pikulski and Chard, 2005). It is also one of the most common, reliable and valid indicators of general reading achievement, including reading comprehension.

The faster and more automatically a reader can decode, the more the short term memory is available to pay attention to the meaning of the text being read and connect it with prior knowledge. Fluency and comprehension go together, because it is difficult to read fluently if you do not understand what you are reading. If the reader takes a long time to work out the sounds of and recognize the words, the working memory will be too busy decoding to attend to the meaning of the words and of the text as a whole. Automaticity reduces the load on working memory considerably.

Learners who can read fluently with automaticity, appropriate pace, accuracy, and good expression are better able to comprehend the content of the text material because they can focus on the meaning of what they read.

Though fluency is necessary for comprehension it is not the only factor. The learners must know the language of the text and prior knowledge about its subject matter.

Fluency expectations

If children are taught reading in their home language systematically and explicitly (and at the same time motivated through pleasurable activities, hearing and reading good books and gaining meaning from what they hear read to them and read themselves) then nearly all children (whatever their socio-economic background) should be able to read Grade 1 level texts at an acceptable level of fluency at the end of the year of study.

This expectation should be strong with the African languages (where the correspondence between sounds and letters is regular). There are however other

syntax: the rules concerning the arrangement and order of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language

factors that make learning to read in African languages difficult, such as the orthography, length of words, and the complexity of the word structure. Fluency usually takes somewhat longer to develop in English than other European languages (because the correspondence between sounds and letters is often irregular in English). This difficulty of English is an important matter because from Grade 4 the majority of South African school learners are taught in English though it is not their mother tongue.

Reading fluency expectations will be influenced by the state of the learners' knowledge of the language and its vocabulary, level of cognitive development, decoding speed and accuracy, automatic recognition of words, their experience and practice of meaningful reading. In poor communities the health of learners will also be an issue, and their general inferencing abilities.

When teachers assess reading fluency, the text being read must be at the appropriate Grade level with a familiar type of text with suitable vocabulary.

A number of research studies have shown that South African schoolchildren have very poor reading fluency. Though first grade children must be able to read at a minimum number of words correct per minute to be able to understand what they are reading at a very basic level, currently the majority of first graders in South Africa cannot do so. This has consequences for their further development as readers.

One South African study found that a large majority of Grade 5 learners were still reading at a grade 1 level – they were reading so slowly that they did not understand anything that they are reading and could not communicate meaning orally in English (Draper and Spaull, 2015). A 2017 study of Grade 3 learners found a similar situation (Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlawane (2020).

Developing fluency

Oral reading fluency is the accurate reading of words in a text at an appropriate pace, with suitable expression, that helps enable the reader to genuinely and fully comprehend the meaning of the text.

As learners progress through the school grades, fluency practice should increasingly focus on the strategic integration of decoding, fluency, and comprehension tasks.

Fluency is impossible without decoding skills and decoding that becomes largely automatic. But this can only happen with regular daily practice, including reading in the classroom and homework reading, full access to books and other reading materials, and adequate teacher feedback on learners' reading.

Fluency cannot be developed if there is a lack of opportunities for reading and writing and if the only 'reading' that happens is reading aloud as a class and chorusing text after a teacher. (Hoadley, 2012). It cannot develop if children in the early grades never get to read extended texts in a variety of **genres.**

Once learners have become fluent readers they can make the transition from basic 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' with increasingly complex texts and **text types.**

inference: making use of the information in a text to work out something that is not directly stated in that text – sometimes called "reading between the lines".

genre: a category of literature, music or art. The main genres in literature are Poetry, Drama, Fiction, Non-fiction and Media, all with many possible subdivisions (See Wikipedia entry for List of writing genres).

text type: the different types of writing, broadly divided into factual and literary. Factual text types include factual description, account, or persuasive. Literary text types include poetry, narrative or personal response.

Unit 1: The meaning of fluency

1. Define oral reading fluency.

2. Name three things without which it is impossible to become a fluent reader.

3. Define automaticity.

4. Fill in the missing words in these sentences:

    a) The _____ at which a text is read should be appropriate.

    b) _____ refers to recognising words in a text and reading them without mistakes.

    c) _____ is the use of expression and phrasing when reading texts.

5. Name three components of prosody.

6. Explain why fluency is a critical factor in the comprehension of texts.

7. "Reading fluency can only be expected in the Intermediate Phase for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds."
   Is this a reasonable expectation?

2. Reading fluency instruction

Teachers need to be able to implement various forms of instruction to develop reading fluency. For this, regular deliberate practice of reading is essential. Such practice must strategically integrate decoding, fluency, and comprehension tasks. (See Department of Basic Education, 2020, pp. 83-94, and Honig *et al.*, 2018, pp. 374-404).

Specifically, fluency development requires working those key components of fluency: pace, accuracy (including decoding and decoding automaticity), and prosody.

Fluency cannot be developed if learners are unable to decode texts and develop automaticity in word recognition.

Key fluency development practices

The following are a set of useful ways of developing reading fluency:

Modelling

Children need models of good, accurate and expression filled reading that can be done by teachers, peers and through audio-recordings. Teachers need to be good readers themselves.

Independent silent reading

Fluent reading is the result of a lot of silent reading. In addition, nobody can develop a rich reading vocabulary without it. Much of this silent reading will have to be done out of school and it should be regularly set as homework.

Though monitoring silent reading is obviously harder to monitor that reading out aloud, teachers can regularly check whether learners have comprehended a text. Independent silent reading should be backed up by regular oral reading in the early grades.

Reading aloud

Oral reading should be monitored by the teacher for accuracy, pace and prosody and feedback given to each learner. This is vital in the early grades.

Practices such as repeated reading aloud three or four times of the same text until it can be read fluently are helpful. Repeated reading can be linked to the purposes of reading – comprehension in which aspects of the meaning gained from the texts include such things as actions taking place and their sequence, and then in later grades things such as the plot of story, motivations of the characters, what happens at the end, etc. Another practice is timed oral reading to improve pace. This is particularly useful for slow but accurate readers.
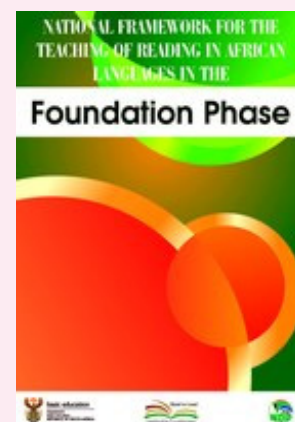
Assisted reading

Assisted reading happens when a teacher or other children or an audio resource is used to support the learning reader.

Assisted reading can take several forms (but one must remember that Modelling is an integral part of Assisted reading).

Group Guided reading

This has children reading aloud (or silently) from the same appropriate level book in a guided reading group with the teacher. The whole group reads the same story. The Department of Basic Education's *Curriculum and Assessment Statements* (CAPS) encourages one form of this they call Shared reading.

Shared reading involves the teacher holding an enlarged size text (a "big book" which has a limited amount of well structured, repetitive and predictable text and good clear illustrations) and reading and taking the class of children through this text. This is done in short sessions over several days, constantly checking that the learners are following the text. The learners are gradually involved in reading the story themselves.

The first session focuses on the enjoyment and first 'look' at the text, with the children giving a personal response to the text. In the next session the same text is used and the focus shifts to more involvement in the reading with the teacher using the discussions that take place to develop vocabulary, comprehension, decoding skills and text structures (grammar, punctuation, etc.) in context. On the third, and possibly the fourth day, children read the text themselves and engage in oral, practical and written activities based on the text.

The *CAPS* states that the text is aimed at the top group in the Foundation phase class (i.e. who can already read) not only in home language but also in initial English First Additional language teaching.

The texts should very gradually increase in complexity as the year progresses. As learners move into Grades 2 and 3 the texts should become more challenging.

Paired reading

This is done by children sitting in pairs to take turns in reading aloud to each other and providing corrective feedback. The text should be reasonably easy. This encourages them to read well in a supportive environment. Often a stronger reader is paired with a weaker reader.

In duet reading two readers read aloud in unison.

In echo reading a fluent reader reads aloud a section of text (sentence, paragraph, page) and the learner repeats the text aloud as they point to the words they are reading.

Audio supported reading

The readers follow an audio-recording in their texts, seeing the words as they listen to the audio reading (on computer, cellphone, tablet or CD). Reading must be slow enough for the learner to keep up.
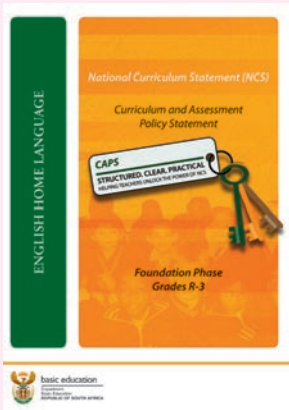
Choosing appropriate texts

Both in providing suitable texts for learners to read to develop their fluency and for the purpose of testing that fluency, educators need to consider the various elements of text choice.

The basic rule is that the learners at this particular grade level should be able to independently read the text with very high (at least 90% and ideally 99%) accuracy. Some texts will need to be below and some above this level. The teacher may need to check the difficulty level for individual learners by asking them to read the first hundred words.

Appropriate text length is also important. Initially texts should be short, especially if they are going to be reread several times.

The content needs to be varied and be linked to the interests of the children, both girls and boys. The texts can also be linked to themes covered in the class curriculum.

Crucially, children must have real books and other materials to read. Without access to ample supplies of reading material, including material they can take home to read there, developing fluency is impossible.

Where classroom and school library facilities are inadequate, particularly in relation to African language texts, online resources may help, as long as the teacher has facilities to print copies of downloaded texts or screens to display them on.

Easily accessible online resources include the following:

Department of Basic Education workbooks and readers

Since 2011 the Department of Basic Education produced free Literacy workbooks in all the home languages for all primary education school grades R to 6 and readers for grades 1 to 3.

These workbooks can be downloaded from:

https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/Workbooks/tabid/574/Default.aspx

Big Books and Graded readers (Home Language) Grades 1 to 3 can be downloaded from:

https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/LearningandTeaching Support Materials(LTSM)/GradedReadersandBigBookHL.aspx

Big Books, posters, anthology books, workbooks and lesson plans (Second Additional Language) Grade 1 to 3 can be downloaded from:

https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/LearningandTeachingSupport Materials(LTSM)/IIALResources.aspx

International Children's Digital Library

 http://en.childrenslibrary.org/books/index.shtml

Digital library

https://digitallibrary.io/

World reader

https://www.worldreader.org/our-work/library/

Story Weaver

https://storyweaver.org.in

Molteno Vula Bula

https://vulabula.molteno.co.za/

Nal'ibali

Nal'ibali https://nalibali.org/story-resources#

Multilingual stories, rhymes, and audio stories

African storybook

Open access illustrated storybooks in 210 African languages at five reading levels.

https://www.africanstorybook.org

Storybook South Africa

Has taken some of the readers in South African languages and provided text with audio versions of them.

https://global-asp.github.io/storybooks-southafrica/

New Readers publishers

These are designed for adults in adult basic education but many can be read by children.

http://www.newreaders.co.za

Unit 2: Self test questions

1. Fill in the missing words:

    The key components of fluency are _____, _____ (including decoding and automaticity) and _____/expression.

2. Very briefly describe the following:

    Modelling:

    Assisted reading:

    Reading aloud:

3. Briefly distinguish between shared reading and paired reading.

4. Search for a downloadable copy of a suitable illustrated reading text in your own home language for each of Grades 1, 3 and 5.

3. Assessing fluency — oral reading fluency norms

As with any form of learning, reading fluency needs to be assessed for a variety of purposes, the purposes typical of all assessment:

selection (screening)	To find out the starting point for further instruction (and thereby to enable the placement of the learner in a suitable group of learners at the right level to receive an appropriate kind of instruction)
diagnosis	To identify strengths, weaknesses or problems and discover the reasons for any reading difficulties or barriers to progress (and thereby to enable suitable further instruction to be planned).
guidance	To give the learner advice on what further learning or practice is to be done.
grading	To provide standard school test and examination marks or scores that measure achievement and rank learners.
prediction	To predict how well the learner will do in the future and whether extra support or individual attention needs to be given.
motivation	To encourage the learners through feedback on how well they are doing so that they continue to progress.
standard maintaining	To ensure that the level of achievement matches accepted norms and benchmarks.

What are norms and benchmarks for reading fluency?

A number of research studies have shown that South African schoolchildren have very poor reading fluency. How was this fluency measured?

The most common measure is **Oral Reading Fluency** (ORF). Oral Reading Fluency is measured as the number of **words read correctly per minute** (WCPM). The short texts used for checking reading fluency are ones that are at the appropriate reading level and on which learners should achieve nearly 100 per cent accuracy when reading on their own. Such measurement should only be done after the learners have had sufficient practice reading such texts and received feedback from the teacher on their reading.

But how many words a minute does the average schoolchild in a particular grade read accurately in minute? This is what we call a **norm**.

A different question is how many words **should** be read a minute? This is a goal, a target, or minimum level of achievement. This measurement is called a **benchmark**.

The teacher needs to be able to distinguish between norms and benchmarks when talking about oral reading frequency and when testing ORF in the classroom.

norm: describes something that is usual, typical or standard for a particular group of things. In education it describes an average level of performance or achievement of a group or class. It is a peer comparison. The teacher can compare a learner's score to the scores of other same-grade learners in the class, school, nation, or internationally.

benchmark: a goal or target that students should meet to be successful. Often, in education, a benchmark is the minimum score that a learner needs to be considered successful or able to do something.

Norms for fluency

Norms for Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) are developed for each language for the various school grade levels. The performance of children of the same age, experience, and background commonly found in the grade can then be compared with these norms.

Oral Reading Fluency scores differ based on text type and difficulty, whether it is tested in a learner's home language or a second or additional language and whether the language is an agglutinating language or not, and because of the different ways each language is written. Hence the norms for English, French, German, Russian, Afrikaans, isiZulu or Sepedi are all different and they are also different for home or second language readers in these languages.

English norms (standardised in North America and the United Kingdom) are not directly comparable with those for agglutinating African languages. In addition the orthography of the Nguni languages poses several challenges for readers as their agglutinative structure and conjoined orthography give them unusually long and complex words.

Norms for all South African languages are currently being developed (Spaul and Pretorius, 2015, Ardington *et al.*, 2020).

English language oral reading fluency norms

The norm for oral reading fluency at the end of the school year for first Grade learners in the United States of America is 60 words correct per minute (WCPM).

That norm is based on survey data that shows that 50% of Grade 1 learners read at this or a slower pace.

The North American English norms for eight school grades (Hasbrouck and Tindal, 2017) are printed on the next page.

These norms are given for the beginning of the school year, the middle of the year and the end of the year.

The **percentile** figures show the WCPM reached by the learners and are useful in showing the average score (at the 50th percentile) and at the percentiles 10, 25, 75 and 90.

For example take the Grade 1 end of year percentile scores and look at the 90th percentile. It is 116 WCPM. This means 90 per cent of the learners read at this score or below (and that only 10 per cent got this score or higher.)

Based on these norms one can then assume that in an English speaking North American school the average Oral Reading Fluency, measured in Words Correct Per Minute at the end of the school year, rises from 60 in Grade 1 to 151 in Grade 8.

One does have to understand that these norms come from an English-speaking country with a well functioning school system and a relatively high standard of reading proficiency in schools.

percentile: the percentage of learners who got a score equal to or lower than this number.

So a 75th percentile score show that 75 per cent of the learners tested got this or a lower score. That also means that 25 per cent of the learners got a higher score.

North American English Oral Reading Fluency Norms: 2017

Grade	Percentile	Start of year WCPM	Middle of year WCPM	End of year WCPM
1	90		97	116
	75		59	91
	50		**29**	**60**
	25		16	34
	10		9	18
2	90	111	131	148
	75	84	109	124
	50	**50**	**84**	**100**
	25	36	59	72
	10	23	35	43
3	90	134	161	166
	75	104	137	139
	50	**83**	**97**	**112**
	25	59	79	91
	10	40	62	63
4	90	153	168	184
	75	125	143	160
	50	**94**	**120**	**133**
	25	75	95	105
	10	60	71	83
5	90	179	183	195
	75	153	160	169
	50	**121**	**133**	**146**
	25	87	109	119
	10	64	84	102
6	90	185	195	204
	75	159	166	173
	50	**132**	**145**	**146**
	25	112	116	122
	10	89	91	91
7	90	180	192	202
	75	156	165	177
	50	**128**	**136**	**150**
	25	102	109	123
	10	79	88	98
8	90	185	199	199
	75	161	173	177
	50	**133**	**146**	**151**
	25	106	115	124
	10	77	84	97

Hasbrouck, J. and Tindal, G. 2017. *An update to compiled ORF norms* (Technical Report No. 1702). Eugene, Oregon:. Behavioral Research and Teaching, University of Oregon

English second language oral reading fluency norms

What about where the learners in a school system are not mother-tongue English speakers? Usually the ORF test scores will be lower than those for home-language speakers.

Here are the scores for English Second Language learners in one area in the United States of America:

Oral Reading Fluency scores for English Second Language in Broward County Public Schools, Florida, United States of America, Non-English speakers: 2012

Grade	Percentile	Start of year WCPM	Middle of year WCPM	End of year WCPM
1	90		62	78
	75		48	61
	50		**34**	**43**
	25		20	24
	10		6	7
2	90	47	79	82
	75	36	61	64
	50	**23**	**41**	**44**
	25	11	21	24
	10	0	3	7
3	90	58	73	85
	75	44	58	68
	50	**29**	**41**	**49**
	25	13	24	30
	10	1	9	13
4	90	86	93	102
	75	70	75	84
	50	**51**	**56**	**65**
	25	33	37	45
	10	16	19	27
5	90	103	93	128
	75	83	78	107
	50	**61**	**62**	**85**
	25	40	46	62
	10	20	32	42

Currently the ORF scores for English second language learners in South Africa are generally lower than these. Draper and Spaull (2015) found that with Grade 5 learners in rural schools the average WCPM scores on an end of Grade 3 level English text average was 46. There was some variation between provinces (ranging from 40 to 61). Girls (52) did better than boys (40). The average comprehension score for a very simple test on the text read was 26%.

They concluded (p. 38):

> The English oral reading fluency of grade 5 rural ESL learners in South Africa is exceedingly low. 41% of the sample read at cripplingly slow speeds of less than 40 words correct per minute with an average of only 17 WCPM and can therefore be considered non-readers. These students were reading so slowly that they could not understand what they were reading at even the most basic level. ... These students cannot communicate meaning orally in English. Given that the language of learning and teaching from grade 4 is English for almost all of these students, this is of serious concern.

Oral reading fluency norms in African languages

There is still very little data on Oral Reading Fluency norms for South African school learners in the African languages, let alone **standardisation** of those norms (Pretorius, 2018, Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlwane, 2020). Research on developing ORF norms in South Africa is ongoing.

Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlawane (2020) report on a 2017 study of reading data from Grade 3 learners at no-fee schools in three South African provinces based on an adaptation of the international Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) test which includes an ORF component.

The ORF results in WCPM at the start of the Grade 3 year were as follows:

Grade	Percentile	All	Northern Sotho	Xitsonga	isiZulu
3	90	54	67	71	42
	75	42	55	57	33
	50	26	41	47	21
	25	8	11	13	6
	10	0	0	0	0

This data shows different results for each language. These differences in such tests may be results of differences in the typical reading pace for each language or of other factors (such as the quality of teaching in the schools, availability of reading materials, or the way words are counted in the test, etc.). Whatever the reason, they compare very poorly with the norms for Grade 3 shown on pages 13 and 14.

There is some evidence to show that the agglutinating nature of African languages, their complex consonant sequences and whether they have conjunctive or disjunctive orthographies may have important impacts on the pace of reading accurately.

One can also note that word length is influenced by whether it is written in a conjunctive or disjunctive orthography. Nguni texts will yield short texts with long words, while the same text in a disjunctive orthography (for example in the Sotho language) will yield longer texts with many short words. The basic language structure is the same but the word length will be determined by the type of orthography. The text length will be more or less the same, except that the Sotho text will have more spaces (due to the shorter "words").

standardisation: the process of ensuring that a test gains results that permit reliable comparison of the results from all the takers of the test.

A standardised test (or a norm-referenced test) means that an individual's score is a measure of how well he or she did in comparison with a large group that represents the general group or population for given ages).

EGRA: The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is an individually administered oral assessment of the most basic foundation skills for literacy acquisition in early grades. It is available in many languages.

conjunctive orthography: writing system where each written (orthographic) word corresponds to one spoken (linguistic) word (as in Nguni language texts). E.g. in isiZulu *'They used to read it'* is written conjunctively as a single orthographic word *Babeyifunda.*

disjunctive orthography: Writing system where each written spoken (linguistic) word is broken up into component (orthographic) parts (as in Sotho language texts where some of the verbal elements in a sentence (e.g. noun class markers and suffixes) are written separately. E.g. in Sesotho *'Ke a leboha'* (*Thank you*) is actually one word – 'ke' and 'a' possess no independent meaning.

The development of ORF norms in all South African languages is compromised by the general very low level of reading achievement.

Unit 3: Self test questions

1. What does ORF stand for and how is it measured?

2. Define an educational norm.

3. Can the same ORF norms be applied to all languages?

4. Why are English norms not suitable for the South African African languages?

5. If you look at a learner's score and it is at the 60th percentile what does that mean?

6. What is the 50th percentile English ORF score norm for grade 4 learners at the end of the school year in North America?

7. What is the same norm for English second language grade 4 learners at the end of the school year in Broward County, Florida, United Sates of America?

4. Assessing fluency — oral reading fluency benchmarks

Fluency benchmarks serve the purpose of giving guidance to teachers on what level of fluency their children should be expected to achieve at a particular Grade level in a particular language.

A benchmark is a goal or target that learners should meet to be successful. Often, in education, a benchmark is the minimum score (or threshold score) that a learner needs to reach to be considered successful or to begin to be able to do something. They are useful as screening measures.

Indeed, in looking at benchmarks it is helpful to distinguish between a threshold level of fluency – the level that must be reached to start to read with any real comprehension – and a true benchmark which is a more developed and sustainable level of skill upon which further progress in fluency and comprehension can be built. If they read slower than this, their comprehension will be compromised and they will struggle to keep up in the next grade or phase of schooling.

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) norms are commonly examined to help determine the benchmarks for both the minimum and the desirable average standard of proficiency for reading.

Another variable factor in deciding on minimum benchmarks is the level of comprehension one expects fluent readers to achieve. ORF is the flow and efficiency with which one reads aloud accurately, saying the words and following the grammatical forms and punctuation correctly. Correct word recognition should be high (99%). Understanding the meaning of the word in its context is more variable though ideally it should be more than 90 per cent for a good reader.

Research has shown that to read a simple passage with comprehension, because of the limitations of short-term memory, requires a minimum of at least 40 words per minute in languages with a disjunctive orthography.

Unfortunately, in South Africa, the general level of reading achievement in schools is so poor that any ORF norms derived from current levels of reading achievement would be unacceptably low. Simply put, as South Africa has such low norms for ORF that one cannot use them as benchmarks.

South African benchmarks have to be set independently on the basis of what minimum proficiency is needed to read effectively and what end level of achievement should be aimed for.

Such benchmarks can be based on norms from other countries but must take into account the differences in the effectiveness of reading instruction in South African schools. They should also rely on what is shown by research to be the minimum base level of ORF required to be able to read words accurately and comprehend meaning.

reading accuracy: This is reading words in a text without mistakes. For a reader to understand what a text means, that text first must be read with a certain level of accuracy.

disjunctive orthography: writing system where each spoken word is broken up into component (orthographic) parts when written down. E.g. in Sesotho "Ke a leboha" (Thank you) is actually one word – the 'ke' and 'a' possess no independent meaning.
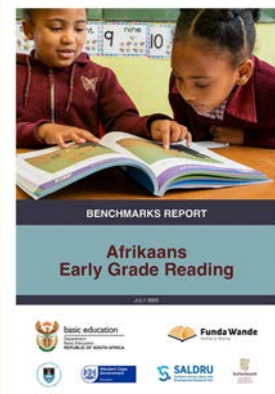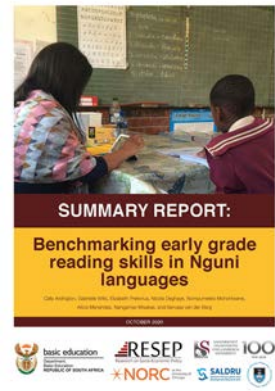
So what sort or fluency achievement is required to meet legitimate and realistic expectations? In other words, what benchmarks for ORF are needed in South African schools for the various languages?

Currently, research is being undertaken to develop benchmarks for all the South African languages.

Reports have already been published for Afrikaans, Nguni languages, Sesotho and Setswana and also for English First Additional Language.

English ORF benchmarks

The tables of on pages 13 and 14 of North American ORF norms for English home and second language speakers provide some guidance on what the benchmarks could be set for minimum proficiency and a desirable average attainment. However these may be difficult to apply in South Africa except in well resourced schools or for children fully immersed in an English-speaking environment.

What is clear, however, is that in initial reading development in Grade 1, a reading achievement benchmark in Grade 1 might be 40 wcpm. This is because there is considerable evidence that by the end of Grade 1 a child must be able to read between 30 and 40 words correct per minute to be able to understand what they are reading at the most basic level. This would also apply to English second language speakers (though at a later grade level).

By the end of Grade 3 most English home language learners should be able to read at least 90-107 wcpm.

English First Additional Language (EFAL) readers need to be able to read at least 90 wcpm by Grade 5. If they read slower than this, their comprehension will be compromised and they will struggle to keep up in the Intermediate Phase. The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (CAPS) for EFAL develops from the assumption that when children begin to read and write in their additional language, they already know how to decode in their home language. It assumes that they have grasped concepts of print and have prior knowledge of sound-spelling relationships (Department of Basic Education. 2011).

In developing ORF benchmarks for EFAL in South Africa it is recognised that an 85% reading accuracy rather than the traditional 95% used for home language may be used because of the known difficulties of English with its deep or opaque orthography.

But even at this lower accuracy level few learners will be able to read in EFAL with comprehension unless they read faster than 50 words correct per minute. Learners who read less than 50 words per minute have not yet reached accuracy levels to support automaticity.

Therefore for both English home language and FAL there is fluency threshold of 50 cwpm and a benchmark of 90 cwpm (Wills, G., Ardington, C., Pretorius, E., and Sebaeng, L. 2022).

deep orthography: a writing system that does not have a one-to-one correspondence between the language sounds and letters that represent them

Suggested English ORF benchmarks

Grade	Home language	EFAL
1	40	
2	50 [threshold]	30
3	90 [benchmark]	50 [threshold]
4	120	70
5	135	90 [benchmark]
6	145	100

Though these are low by international standards they are a start.

African language ORF benchmarks

Currently there are no standardised ORF norms for all South African languages and therefore any minimum ORF benchmarks are tentative (Ardington *et al.*, 2020), though progress isbeing made on developing them.

The differences in word length in the disjunctive and conjunctive orthographies of the African languages affect the pace at which people read the individual 'words'. This has important implications for benchmarking and for identifying at-risk readers at different grade levels. Basically the Nguni languages are read at a lower words per minute rate because the 'words' are longer.

Research has shown that to read a simple passage with comprehension, because of the limitations of short-term memory, requires a minimum of at least 40 words per minute in languages with a disjunctive orthography.

The following are very tentative minimum benchmarks in wcpm for the disjunctive and conjunctive orthography African languages (a language such as Xitsonga would have an intermediate position):

Minimum ORF benchmarks in WCPM

Grade	Disjunctive	Conjunctive
1	40	20
2	50	24
3	60	35
4	75	40
5	90	50
6	100	60

Recent reseach has suggested the following for Sesotho-Setswana (Mohohlwane, Ardington, Wills, and Sebaeng, *et al.* 2022, p. 28):

Grade	Sesotho-Setswana
1	40 letters correct per minute
2	40 wcpm [benchmark]
3	60 wcpm [benchmark]

conjunctive orthography: a writing system system where all the component parts of a spoken 'word' are written down joined up together. E.g. in IsiZulu "Babeyifunda" is a composite word meaning (in English) "They used to read it".

The suggestions for the Nguni languages are (Ardington, Wills, Pretorius, Deghaye, Moholwane, Menendez, Mtsatse, and van der Berg, 2020):

Grade	Nguni languages
1	40 letters correct per minute
2	20 wcpm [benchmark]
3	35 wcpm [benchmark]

The suggestions for Afrikaans are as follows (Ardington, C., Mohohlwane, N., Barends, Z. 2022):

Grade	Afrikaans
1	40 letters correct per minute
2	50 wcpm [threshold]
3	80 wcpm [benchmark]

Unit 4: Assessing fluency — oral reading fluency benchmarks

1. Should South Africa base its ORF benchmarks on current South African norms?

2. What is considered a minimum benchmark in English home language ORF for Grade 1?

3. What would be a similar benchmark for English home language by the end of Grade 3?

4. Are suggested minimum ORF benchmarks higher or lower for conjunctive orthography African languages compared with disjunctive ones?

5. Measuring oral reading fluency in practice

For children to become good readers they must acquire the basic skills to accurately and fluently decode letters and words and increasingly do this in an automatic and effortless way with grade appropriate level texts.

Reading fluency tasks should be used for monitoring the progress of individual learners and for identifying learners who are experiencing reading difficulties. They can be used as useful screening measures to assist in placing learners in appropriate instructional groups.

Oral Reading Fluency tests can be used to assess whether the learners are reading at one of three main fluency levels:

- **independent reading level** (with nearly 100% word recognition and comprehension level above 90%)

- **instructional reading level** (with word recognition above 90% but comprehension no lower than 75%)

- **frustration reading level** (with word recognition below 90% and comprehension at less than 50%, which means that the learner cannot really understand the text).

Oral Reading Fluency tests

ORF tests can be formal and informal.

ORF is one of the best indicators of learner reading comprehension. Because ORF can be tested relatively quickly it is very useful for screening learners at different points in the school year and monitoring their progress.

Formal tests can be administered on a regular basis to check on the progress of the learners which enables suitable instruction to be given to learner who have not reached an independent reading level. Suitable benchmarks need to be decided on for both minimum and target achievement.

There are various guidelines and rubrics for the formal assessment of reading fluency.

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tests provide a set of tests, not only for ORF, that are extremely useful as screening tests at the beginning of the year and as checks on mid-year and end of year progress.

Informal testing of reading fluency should be done throughout the Foundation Phase years.

The *National Framework for the Teaching of reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase* (Department of Education, 2020, pp. 40-44; 83-94), has advice on a range of suitable informal exercises and tests for assessing fluency.
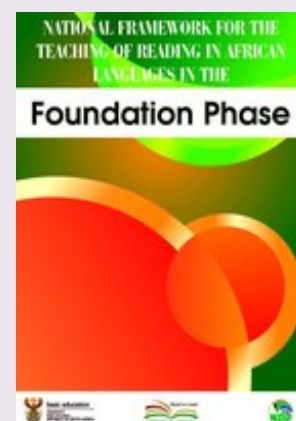
EGRA: The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is an individually administered oral assessment of the most basic foundation skills for literacy acquisition in early grades. It focuses on emergent literacy (birth to grade 1), decoding (beginning grade 1) and checking for meaning and sense and fluency (end of grade 1 to end of grade 3).

Guidelines for a formal ORF assessment

Preconditions

These are the initial preconditions for an assessment:

- Set reasonable expectations for students' reading accuracy, pace, and expression, taking into account the reading level, words correct per minute, and type of text (e.g., expository, narrative, poetry). In other words decide on the minimum and target benchmarks. (If there are realistic norms available aim for learners to read grade-level text aloud at around the 50th–75th percentiles, with accuracy and expression.)

- The learners should have practised reading texts multiple times. These texts should be carefully selected so that the learners can read with at least 95% accuracy. There should have been a specific comprehension-focused purpose for each reading.

- The vocabulary in the texts should have been taught through explicit decoding practice and the meaning of the vocabulary discussed. Any new vocabulary should have been used in several practice sentences.

A typical procedure for testing ORF

This should ideally be done three times with three unpracticed, grade-level texts.

1. Choose a text from an appropriate grade level book that a fluent reader at that grade level could finish in a minute. In English for Grade 3 it should be about 200 words long . In other words it should be a text that learners at this level should be able to read independently with very high accuracy.

2. Prepare a sheet for your record use and have one sheet for each learner.

    - The text for the reader should be typed left justified only and with no more than ten to twelve words a line (50 to 70 characters a line)

    - Count the number of words (excluding the title) per line and place the cumulative totals for each line in a column to the right.

3. Have your cellphone stopwatch ready.

4. Tell the learner you are going to ask them to read a story text out loud. Tell them that if they get stuck on a word you will tell them it, so that they can continue.

5. Point to the title and ask them what the story may be about. (This may help to activate background knowledge.)

6. Start the reading.

7. As the child reads do the following:

    - Cross out any word the learner skips (omits), mispronounces, substitutes another word for, or when he or she transposes the order of words.

    - Do not mark as incorrect or skipped if the learner corrects him or herself; adds a word appropriate for the context, repeats a word, or reads with a non-standard accent.

Oral Reading Fluency #	Date:	
Why dogs chase goats		
Text		**No of words per line (cumulative)**
One day a goat, a dog and a sheep got into a taxi. They were going to visit their families on the farm.		16 23
The goat was very drunk. He drank from a small bottle all the time.		37
He shouted cheeky remarks out of the window at women. He sang rude songs in a LOUD voice.		49 55
The dog got angry with the goat and snapped at him. The sheep got nervous because he was in the middle. The goat fell on the floor.		68 81 82
When they got to the place the taxi driver said, "The fare is 50c each."		96 97
The sheep gave the taxi driver 50c. He put it in his pocket. The dog gave the taxi driver R1.		112 117
The goat opened the door, fell out of the taxi and ran away.		130
The sheep got out of the car and just stood there.		141
The dog said, "Where is my change?"		148
The taxi driver said, "What change? Your friend hasn't paid. Go and get your change from him."		159 165
The dog jumped out of the taxi. He ran after the goat. The dog chased the goat zig-zagging across the veld.		179 186
The taxi driver drove away. The sheep is still standing in the road. The dog is still chasing the goat.		199 206
Name:	Grade: #	
Number of words read in one minute:		
Number of words read incorrectly:		
Total number of words read correctly:		
Notes on comprehension:		
Notes on prosody:		

Example of an ORF testing sheet with a text at Grade 3 level from an adult reader

- If they get stuck on a word, give them the word so that they can continue.

- Note any errors or inadequacies in expression (prosody).

8. Stop the child at the end of the minute and mark the last word read.

9. You may want to ask a few comprehension questions after this to see how well they have understood the text.

10. Note the number of words read by the end of a minute (Note the number of seconds if less than a minute).

11. Count the number of words skipped or incorrect.

12. Calculate the ORF: Number of words read – number of words read incorrectly. If the learner read fast and finished before the minute ended use this formula:

$$\frac{60 \textbf{ X } \text{number of words correct}}{\text{Number of seconds}}$$

After testing ORF

You should keep a record log of each learners progress on a chart. There is a useful University of Washington's chart generator:

https://2tphyd2raecs4dg3oo3o9r3c-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UW_Growth_Calculator.xls

(For advice on systematic recording of ORF progress see Honig *et al.*, 2018, pp. 343-354).

Learners who fall below the minimum benchmark should received further diagnostic testing to check their phonemic awareness and decoding skills. The teacher can also check their language comprehension. The reading deficit may be due to a lack of language comprehension. (There is a easy way to determine that.)

Remember that the ORF score does not tell you **why** the learner got a high or low score.

Measuring prosody

Apart from looking at the pace and accuracy of word recognition the teacher needs to look at expression. Is it a prosodic reading? Unlike pace and the accuracy of word recognition, measuring prosody is difficult to measure objectively. It must be judged by you, the teacher, to the best of your ability. Such judgments can be assisted by using a rating scale or **rubric**, such as this one below.

Typical categorisations of fluency for beginning readers that take into account expression usually have something like the following:

Non fluent	Level 1	Reads primarily word-by-word. Occasional two-word or three-word phrases may be read but this is not done frequent and/or they do not preserve meaningful syntax.
Non fluent	Level 2	Reads primarily in two-word phrases with some three- or four-word phrases and some word-by-word reading may still be present. Word groupings may seem awkward and unrelated to the larger context of the sentence or passage
Semi fluent	Level 3	Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups. Some small groupings may be present however, the majority of phrasing is appropriate and preserves the syntax of the writer. Little or no expressive interpretation is present.
Fluent	Level 4	Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regressions, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the writer's syntax is consistent. Most of the story is read with expressive interpretation.

Clearly, when using such a scale, you as the assessor have to make judgements about how well the phrasing and expression is done. Expression is an important indicator of whether the meaning of the text has been comprehended.

More detailed prosody assessment scales are also useful. See the example on the next page, adapted from Prosody Assessment Scale in Honig *et al.,* 2018, p. 33:

Prosody Assessment Rating Scale				
Feature of spoken language	**Nonprosodic**			**Prosodic**
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Stress (only relevant in English and Afrikaans, in African languages it is tone)	Equally stresses each word in a sentence or stresses in a sentence	Equally stresses each word in a sentence or stresses the unimportant words in a sentence	Stresses the most important words in a sentence	Stresses all appropriate words in a sentence
Phrasing	Reads primarily word by word	Reads primarily in two-word phrases, but sometimes word by word	Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrases	Reads primarily in larger meaningful phrases
	Often pauses after every word and within words	Often pauses within phrases	Often pauses between phrases, but occasionally pauses within them	Consistently pauses at the end of clauses and sentences
	Chunks words with no attention to sentence syntax or does not chunk them at all	Chunks words with little attention to author's syntax	Often chunks words appropriately, preserving author's syntax	Consistently chunks appropriately, preserving author's syntax
Intonation	Does not change pitch to reflect end marks	Occasionally changes pitch to reflect end marks	Often changes pitch to reflect end marks	Consistently changes pitch to reflect end marks
Expression	Reads in a monotone	Occasionally uses voice to reflect character's emotions or actions	Usually uses voice to reflect character's emotions or actions	Consistently uses voice to reflect character's emotions or actions
Pauses	Reads from one sentence to the next without pausing for punctuation	Pauses between sentences only when there is a period	Usually pauses at commas and end marks	Consistently pauses appropriately at all punctuation

Honig *et al.*, 2018, p. 33, adapted from Daane *et al.*, 2005; Dowhower, 1991; Hudson, Lane, and Pullen,2005.

chunk: to chunk is to group together items or words so that they can be processed as single concepts or unit, for example grouping the words in a sentence into short meaningful phrases.

Expression in reading aloud, through the various forms of prosody, is very important, for it shows that the meaning of the text is being communicated when it is read aloud. Hence the learners need regular exercise in reading aloud so that the automaticity of their reading and the expression of their comprehension of the read text can be monitored.

Note that the correct pronunciation of words is often derived from the context provided by nearby words.

Unit 5: Self test questions

1. Recommended accuracy levels for oral reading fluency are quite high. Which level is needed for independent reading level proficiency? 67%, 75% or 99%?

2. A learner cannot really understand a text if their comprehension level is lower than which percentage score? 90% , 75% or 50%?

3. How often should oral reading fluency tests be done?

4. "Learners should not have practised reading similar texts before doing an ORF test." Is this statement true or false?

5. Does an ORF test tell you why a reader fails to read well?

5. List some of the components of prosody.

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Self test answers

Unit 1: The meaning of fluency

1. **Define oral reading fluency.**

   The ability to read aloud the words in a text with accuracy at an appropriate (conversational) pace and with meaningful expression (prosody) (that helps the reader to genuinely and fully comprehend the meaning of the text).

2. **Name three things without which it is impossible to become a fluent reader.**

   Decoding skills

   Automaticity

   Regular reading practice with a variety of texts in various genres

3. **Define automaticity.**

   The ability to recognise known words instantly without having to sound them out or think about them.

4. **Fill in the missing words in these sentences:**

   a) The **pace** at which a text is read should be appropriate.

   b) **Decoding** refers to recognising words in a text and reading them without mistakes.

   c) **Prosody** is the use of expression and phrasing when reading texts.

5. **Name three components of prosody.**

   stress patterns (e.g. syllable prominence) [English and Afrikaans]

   phrasing (of groups of words)

   variations in pitch or intonation (raise or lower voice)

   emphasis on the right words

   tone of the voice (happy, sad, etc.)

   pauses between phrases, setences and paragraphs

   duration (how long it takes to say a word, phrase or sentence)

7. **Explain why fluency is a critical factor in the comprehension of texts.**

   Learners who can read fluently (with automaticity, appropriate pace, accuracy, and good expression) are better able to comprehend the content of the text material because they can focus on the meaning of what they read. If the reader takes a long time to work out the sounds of and recognize the words, the working memory will be too busy decoding to attend to the meaning of the words and of the text as a whole.

8. **"Reading fluency can only be expected in the Intermediate Phase for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds." Is this a reasonable expectation?**

   No, it is too low. Children from all socio-economic backgrounds can become fluent readers in the Foundation phase if well taught and provided with texts.

Unit 2: Fluency instruction

1. Fill in the missing words:

The key components of fluency are **pace**, **accuracy** (including decoding and automaticity) and **prosody**/expression.

2. Very briefly describe the following:

Modelling: a teacher or peer demonstrates good reading aloud.

Assisted reading: a teacher or other children or an audio resource is used to support the learning reader.

Reading aloud: regular reading aloud by the learners and which is monitored by the teacher for accuracy, pace and prosody and feedback given to each learner.

Audio-supported reading: readers follow an audio-recording in their texts, seeing the words as they listen to the audio reading.

3. Briefly distinguish between shared reading and paired reading.

In **shared reading** the group follow the text in a special 'big book' held up by the teacher who takes the class through several short sessions over several days

In **paired reading** two readers (at the same level or one a strong reader and the other weaker reader) take turns reading a text to each other whilst providing any necessary feedback to each other.

4. Search for a downloadable copy of a suitable illustrated reading text in your own home language for each of Grades 1, 3 and 5.

Unit 3: Assessing fluency — oral reading fluency norms

1. **What does ORF stand for and how is it measured?**

   Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is measured in Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) using a short text at a suitable level of difficulty.

2. **Define an educational norm.**

   An educational norm is the usual level of performance or achievement of a group or class. It is a peer comparison. The teacher can compare a learner's score to the norm based on all the scores of other same-grade learners in the class, school, nation or internationally.

3. **Can the same ORF norms be applied to all languages?**

   No. ORF scores differ based on language, whether a home or a second language, and on text type and difficulty level of the text.

4. Why are English norms not suitable for South African African languages?

   Because African agglutinating languages are not comparable to English and in particular the conjoined orthography of the Nguni languages give them unusually long and complex words.

5. **If you look at a learner's score and it is at the 60th percentile what does that mean?**

   The learner has a score better than 60 percent of the learners who took the test.

6. **What is the 50th percentile English ORF score norm for grade 4 learners at the end of the school year in North America?**

   133 WCPM

7. **What is the same norm for English second language grade 4 learners at the end of the school year in Broward County, Florida, United Sates of America?**

   65 WCPM

Unit 4: Assessing fluency — oral reading fluency benchmarks

1. **Should South Africa base its ORF benchmarks on current South African norms?**

   No. As the South African norms show very low levels of reading proficiency such benchmarks would be too low.

2. **What is considered a minimum benchmark in English ORF for Grade 1?**

   40 WCPM

3. **What would be a similar benchmark for English home language by the end of Grade 3?**

    90 to 107 WCPM

4. **Are suggested minimum ORF benchmarks higher or lower for conjunctive orthography African languages compared with disjunctive ones?**

   Lower.

Unit 5: A Measuring oral reading fluency in practice

1. **Recommended accuracy levels for oral reading fluency are quite high. Which level is needed for independent reading level proficiency? 67%, 75% or 99%?**

   99%

2. **A learner cannot really understand a text if their comprehension level is lower than which percentage score?   90% , 75% or 50%?**

   50%

3. **How often should oral reading fluency tests be done?**

   Regularly.

4. **"Learners should not have practised reading similar texts before doing an ORF test." Is this statement true or false?**

   False. The learners should have practised reading similar (but not the same) such texts many times.

5. **Does an ORF test tell you why a reader fails to read well?**

   No. While it tells you that the reader is not reading at a good pace, or accurately, or with expression, or all three, it does not explain why this is so.

5. **List some of the components of prosody.**

   stress patterns (word and syllable prominence) [English and Afrikaans]

   phrasing (reading groups of words, chunking)

   change in pitch or loudness (intonation)

   pauses at punctuation and conjunctions

   intonation to reflect, sadness, joy, anger, etc.

Study guide 4: Reading Fluency

This is an short introduction to the development of reading fluency in initial reading teaching. It describes the components of reading fluency methods for developing it. The use of fluency norms and benchmarks in the South African context is outlined as are ways of testing oral reading fluency (ORF) in the classroom.

The study guide includes short self-tests for each unit in the Guide.

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