



Advisory Note 3

Oral Reading Fluency Assessment in Grade 3 Learners Across Gauteng Public Primary Schools



Gauteng Department of Education

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1. Background and Rationale

In Gauteng, literacy development is a persistent challenge, particularly in the early grades. The poor performance of Gauteng learners in international reading assessments is a concern, as shown in the recent PIRLS.

Schools in Gauteng offer all 12 official languages as home language and as the language of instruction. In some schools more than one home language is offered. This often creates a disparity in that it results in learners having limited fluency in the language of instruction, which can hinder their acquisition of language skills and competence. While there is increasing recognition of the need for mother-tongue instruction, the dominance of English as a medium of instruction in schools means that assessments conducted in this language may not accurately reflect a learner's reading abilities in their home language.

Gauteng recognises that reading is a complex cognitive process whereby skilled readers decode texts to make meaning. Children's oral language skills serve as the foundation for both aspects of reading ability—word reading and language comprehension. This is supported by established and ongoing research that fluency is impacted by decoding and word recognition. This shows that reading fluency is supported by comprehension which demonstrates a positive link between fluency and reading comprehension.

2. Foundational Skills for Fluency

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is a vital skill that serves as a bridge between foundational reading instruction and comprehensive literacy. Defined as the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression, ORF is a key predictor of reading comprehension and overall academic success. The stages that children go through in their early development of speech and language are crucial for the establishment of their interpersonal communication skills, which in turn enhance their self-confidence and academic performance. It is essential for all education systems to be aware of the level of competency in terms of their learners' reading skills, as the ability to read is fundamental to learning.

The goal of reading is to read for meaning, but before children can read and understand a text independently, they must master many foundational skills. The importance of some earlier processes diminishes as proficiency increases and they are replaced by qualitatively different processes. Yet across all the components, accuracy develops first, followed by increased processing speed, which then leads to automaticity (processing without effort or conscious attention). If decoding skills are below a minimum threshold, reading comprehension remains stagnant. There may also be an upper threshold, beyond which there are no additional gains to comprehension from increased decoding skills. What this means is that both the vertical and the horizontal development of the skills need to be attended to along with the vocabulary and phonological understanding within each language.

3. Importance of Measuring Oral Reading Fluency

Oral Reading Fluency has consistently been found to have a high correlation with reading comprehension. Reading fluency is assessed using ORF measures and benchmarks. Assessments of oral reading fluency are useful indicators of learners' general reading progress and competence and can be done relatively simply. ORF is a 'curriculum based measure', and is easy to assess. ORF assessments measure reading rate and accuracy and are expressed in terms of the number of words read correctly per minute (wcpm). It is a valid, reliable and objective measure that can be used to identify learners with reading difficulties and also for progress monitoring. ORF is a more accurate measure than teacher judgement.

4. Purpose of the ORF Study In Gauteng

The purpose of the GDE ORF study is to add new, policy-relevant information on reading assessment. It includes, for the first time, a close examination of the oral reading fluency and foundational skills of Grade 3 public school learners who perform below national and international benchmarks in reading assessment.

Conducting a study on ORF in Grade 3 learners is essential to address the urgent need for improving literacy outcomes in Gauteng Province. By assessing and improving ORF in Grade 3 learners, the study can provide an opportunity to address reading challenges before learners transition to higher grades where these difficulties can compound and impact on academic performance.

5. Measures of Oral Reading Fluency and Foundational Skills

The GDE ORF study includes measures of word reading, phonological decoding, oral reading fluency and basic comprehension. The first two are regarded as foundational skills for fluency.

- Word reading (also known as word recognition) refers to the ability to recognize familiar written words with appropriate speed and accuracy, relying primarily on orthographic memory (memory of how the words are pronounced).
- Phonological decoding refers to the ability to pronounce unfamiliar words based on knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences.
- Oral reading fluency (passage reading) refers to the ability to read connected text such as paragraphs and passages with appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression, which is an indicator of comprehension.
- Basic comprehension – quick response to 5 questions of which 4 are based on direct citation from the paragraph.

In Gauteng, we have introduced ORF assessments in Grade 3, as it is a critical year for learners that marks a transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." We piloted the ORF assessment in 2019 to determine the reading competencies in English First

Additional Language (ENGFA) for grade 3 learners through an Oral Reading Assessment to assess number of words correctly read per minute. A 126-word passage was used for the assessment. In 2021, the test was repeated targeting 8281 learners.

In 2024, 458 out of 735 sampled Primary schools offering African home language and ENGFA participated and testing was expanded to include Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and IsiZulu. The expansion of languages was based on performance in PIRLS.

6. Test Design

Languages Sampled for ORF Assessment

The study uses Oral Reading Assessments that include standardised tools, such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), adapted for South African languages and contexts. It also uses assessment metrics to measure accuracy (number of words read correctly), speed (number of words read per minute), and prosody (measured using a rubric for expression and phrasing). The assessor captures the scores for each learner in an electronic scoring tool.

The paragraph in the reading norms from EGRA for Grade 3 are:

- 126 words in English;
- 124 words for Setswana
- 79 words in IsiZulu; and
- approx. 135 words in Sepedi and Sesotho

The assessment was also expanded to include a focus on fluency, word recognition, phonics, sight word recognition and reading with comprehension.

Tasks

The test involves a one-on-one engagement with the learner. The ORF study consists of four types of tasks in the following order: (1) Phonics – 1 minute – combination of 36 capital and small letters – to elicit the phonic sound or record if learners calls out the letter, (2) Sight words – 1 minute – 36 words commonly used in Grade 1 to 3, (3) Reading a paragraph – 1 minute – the passage selected is appropriate for the learner’s grade level. It is also representative of typical reading materials for that age group, and (4) 5 questions on comprehension – 1 minute – of 4 questions are based on direct citation from the paragraph and 1 “applied” in line with Grade 2 benchmarks.

The measurement of reading fluency used in the ORF is based on benchmarks established using a modified UNESCO reading skills proficiency table to include CAPS and DBE Reading Benchmarks and Thresholds. The threshold for ENGFA and specific benchmarks for African languages were released in 2022 by DBE and were used to measure oral reading fluency across languages.

Sample Size

A random sample of 458 of 735 schools offering an African home language and English First additional Language, in the foundation phase was selected. The schools were not stratified for the home language dominance. In each school, a random sample of 10 learners per home language offered was selected and a second random sample of 10 learners was selected for ENGFA. In total approximately 7000 learners were selected. The sample composition includes learners from all 15 districts of Gauteng Province, ensuring representation of multilingual contexts and diverse socioeconomic settings.

Administering the Assessment

Introduction prior to the administration of the assessment:

- Introduce the activity warmly to build rapport and reduce anxiety.
- Complete a basic demographic profile of the learners.
- Before the learner starts reading, explain the instructions clearly.
- Tell learners they will read a list of phonic, words and read passage aloud, each for a one minute, and explain that the goal is to read as fluently as possible.
- The learner is asked to read quickly and carefully (or follow the administration instructions for the assessment) until asked to stop.

The learner begins reading the task aloud while the assessor listens. The assessor marks errors and notes the time, typically using a stopwatch or timer. After reading the passage, the learner is asked simple comprehension questions to gauge understanding.

Scoring

The assessor uses electronic instruments which count the total number of words the learner reads correctly in one minute (also known as *words correct per minute* or WCPM). In addition, other observations made by the Assessor include Self-Corrections, Fluency and Expression and Word Errors. The assessor also records overall judgements of fluency.

7. Findings

In terms of the 2019/2020 outcomes, 53% of Grade 3 learners were able to read more than 40 words correctly in a minute, indicating that 47% of learners were below the reading competency levels of the Essential for Academic Learning. The 2021/2022 findings showed a significant decline, with only 23% of learners reaching the benchmark levels and a substantial 77% falling below the expected levels. This decline may be attributed to the disruptions in teaching and learning caused by COVID-19 regulations.

In 2024, the percentage of learners reading above the threshold or benchmark across all languages is 49,9%. The language specific outcomes are:

- ENGFA – 50,1% reading above the threshold of 50 wcpm
- IsiZulu – 49,4% reading above the benchmark of 35 wcpm
- Sepedi - 42,8% reading above the benchmark of 60 wcpm
- Sesotho - 58% reading above the benchmark of 60 wcpm
- Setswana – 43,5% reading above the benchmark of 60 wcpm

8. Impact – how are these results used for resource allocation and support

The findings of this study will inform evidence-based interventions and strategies to address the literacy crisis in South Africa, particularly in Gauteng Province. The study's alignment with national educational priorities, such as the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP), will contribute to the body of evidence needed for effective policy implementation. Ultimately, this study aims to make a meaningful contribution to reversing the literacy crisis and promoting equity in education by equipping learners with the skills requisite for long-term academic success.

Recommendations emerging out of the study:

- A clear standard for assessment needs to be determined and administered from a central point at least once a year, once a term is preferable, including oversight by district officials.
- Transitional challenges from phonics to sight words to comprehension need to be managed better, where learners are taught systematically, sequentially, cumulatively, and daily, to the point of automaticity.
- LTSM allocation should prioritise the promotion of reading skills and strategies in FP through the acquisition of relevant resources to assist learners with reading.
- Remediation of learners who are struggling should take place as soon as the delay in progress is detected. It may be necessary that these learners be taught in a separate class. The provision and use of specialist teachers for remediation at normal primary schools should be considered.
- Transitional challenges regarding the switch from HL instruction to ENGFA instruction need to be managed well from the Foundation Phase (FP).
- Collaborative approaches among teachers is needed, with the Teacher Development Directorate leading the process in making PLCs and Lesson Study functional in schools.
- The provision and use of specialist teachers for remediation at normal primary schools should be considered. Policy for these teachers to rotate between schools may be necessary.
- Time allocation for language is stipulated, and the “drop all and read” programme has been introduced. However, for the foundation phase learners some of the time allocated to reading should be timetabled to include the teacher reading to the class and following up with relevant questions.

9. Cost

The capacity to plan and implement was available via officials already employed to support curriculum or responsible for learners assessment and testing. In total 9 officials were responsible for the design of instruments and 50 district officials were responsible for the administration of the ORF assessment.

The ORF assessment cost R600 000 mainly required for training and travelling costs for the administration of the ORF assessment.