



READING BENCHMARKS

LEARNING BRIEF

October 2023

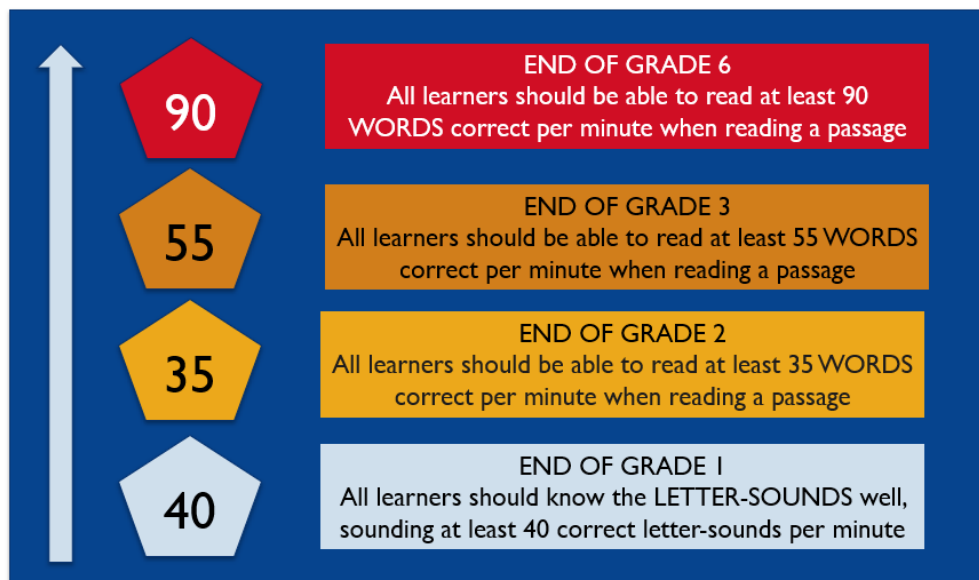
These Tshivenda benchmarks aim to enhance early-grade reading in South Africa. Understanding reading development is vital for teachers. Reading involves linguistic, textual, and code-based skills. Traditional learning-to-read theories have been Eurocentric, but newer models encompass diverse linguistic approaches. The benchmarking effort is led by the Department of Basic Education.

Tshivenda linguistic features

Tshivenda Home Language is spoken by 2.5% of South Africans. Tshivenda's linguistic features are different to many South African languages. It shares similarities with Zimbabwean and Mozambican languages and is a transparent orthography with complex consonant sequences and diacritics. Unique phonology, fewer vowels, complex consonant systems, and significant tonal differences highlight the distinctiveness of Tshivenda in the African reading landscape.

This means that learners reading development in Tshivenda can be faster due to consistent letter-sound relationships.

How fluently must Tshivenda Home Language learners in the Foundation Phase read to be able to “comprehend”?



Grade 1: Learners should achieve 40 correct letter-sounds per minute (clspm). This standard is as relevant for Tshivenda Home Language learners as for other African language readers.

Grade 2: Learners must read a minimum of 35 correct words per minute (cwpm) from a passage. Falling below this mark indicates poor accuracy and comprehension difficulties. These learners need instruction focusing on fluency and frequent reading practice. Learners who reach this benchmark transition from decoding to engaging in advanced reading skills (learning to read moves to reading for learning).

Grade 3: The benchmark is set at 55 cwpm. Achieving this fluency means the learner's working memory is not bogged down by decoding, allowing them to better grasp the text's meaning. It is crucial for learners in Grade 3 to engage with both narrative and informational texts to improve their fluency.

Grade 6: The benchmark rises to 90 cwpm. By this grade, learners need to tackle lengthier and more elaborate texts, requiring an unburdened working memory. Those reading below 90 cwpm will find retaining information from long texts challenging.

While children should ideally achieve these benchmarks, many older students in the research did not, suggesting instructional difficulties for teaching Tshivenda in classrooms rather than unattainable benchmarks.

How can we use reading benchmarks?

NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION	SCHOOL	CLASSROOM
Establishes a definition of reading proficiency	Establishes standards and targets that school leaders can aim towards aligned to national reading goals	Standard against which to measure learner reading skills and the extent of remedial support in specific schools
Clearly communicates standards and targets across the system	Standardises assessment practices across and within schools and that school level assessment is aligned with informing tracking against national reading goals	Focus on interventions to support teachers in the reading and provision of remedial support, and for teachers to adapt instructional focus to meet learners' needs
Monitors progress based on understanding the size and extent of reading gaps and paves the way for a constructive intervention response	Teachers can identify how many children in their class are on track and what support is required for learners who are not on track	Target remedial programmes and activities to learners at risk of not being able to read and those not achieving the benchmark

How did we develop these benchmarks?

The Tshivenda early grade reading benchmarks are based on the reading assessment of more than 3,000 learners across 60 no-fee schools in Venda, in the Limpopo Province. Collaboratively, experts and the Department of Basic Education, supported by the USAID/Southern Africa PERFORMANCE initiative, developed and assessed early grade reading results to determine these benchmarks in Tshivenda for letter-sound knowledge and oral reading fluency. Grades 1, 3, and 6 benchmarks were set based on data collected from learners already in the first term of Grades 2, 4, and 7 in 2023 – in order to compensate for learning losses attributable to the COVID-19 disruptions. The data were collected from Vhembe East and West districts in 2023.