Set for Variability, Self-Teaching,
or simply put: 'Tweaking' or Modifying Pronunciation
for decoding/reading purposes

Debbie Hepplewhite comments:

"There is a danger that teachers are becoming wedded to the idea (particularly when instructed by advisors and inspectors) that beginners must be asked to read *only* the *cumulative* decodable words, 'tricky' or 'common exception words', texts and reading books provided *within their chosen systematic synthetic phonics programme*, and that children should be provided with reading books for any independent reading *exactly* 'matched' to the past and current alphabetic code (letter/s-sound correspondences) taught in the school's phonics programme.

Many teachers are feeling fearful, or they are being prohibited, to provide reading material *according to the progress in reading of each child*.

Teachers also need to take into account that individual children will need more, or less, or no adult support even when reading matched, cumulative, decodable reading material.

In other words, guidance which has hitherto been sensible and understandable to urge publishers of children's reading books to provide 'cumulative, decodable, phonics-based' reading books *in place of* 'repetitive or predictable' book-banded reading books (for beginners) is becoming restrictive and too prescriptive in the classroom. Officials are in danger of micro-management of organization and provision of reading books rather than focusing on high quality *teacher education* of the teaching profession.

Teachers may be insufficiently knowledgeable and skilled, or confident, to teach alphabetic code (letter/s-sound correspondences), words and texts *beyond* the current code and content of their core phonics programme – for example, as opportunities arise naturally in children's names, in the wider curriculum and with wider shared reading and writing. This *incidental* phonics provision also caters for quick learners, children who can soon self-teach beyond the explicit code in the phonics programme. This needs to be considered.

There is a danger of *closing down* on the exposure and stock of printed words, rather than *opening up* the rich world of printed language for learners through explicit teaching practices.

Teachers are arguably in danger of being de-skilled rather than educated, and there is evidence in England's context to show that they are increasingly fearful of allocating reading material sensibly *according to the progress and capability of the individual children in their care*.

Teachers invariably need to differentiate between the core and routine systematic phonics provision which enables some children to 'take off' with their reading at an earlier stage than others, but these precocious readers are likely to still require and benefit from a continued steady, thorough phonics provision for their *spelling development* – including building up knowledge of spelling word banks (words spelt with the same sound-letter/s correspondences) and the spelling of words with unique or unusual spellings over time."
Debbie Hepplewhite, January 2022

Debbie promotes, and has formalized for her phonics programmes, and in her training and consultancy work, an approach described as, '*Two pronged systematic and incidental phonics teaching and learning*' which minimizes the embedding of invented or phonically plausible spelling from the get-go:

https://phonicsinternational.com/Debbie_RRF_Two_pronged_handout.pdf

https://phonicsinternational.com/Debbies_Phonics_Teaching_Tips.pdf

Here are some research findings that may be of interest to show that it could be counter-productive to be too limiting when providing a very strict diet of *only matched reading material* without making allowances for the individual child, and for the purpose of any reading activity – that is, whether the child is asked to read with, or without, adult support – and whether the learning intention is about practising decoding/ (technical) reading skills, or aimed at learning content within the books to develop language comprehension, increase cultural capital, and promote an intellectual understanding about subject-matter and different types of literature.

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7449249/

The Role of Set for Variability in Irregular Word Reading: Word and Child Predictors in Typically Developing Readers and Students At-Risk for Reading Disabilities

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Abstract

The self-teaching hypothesis (Share, 1995) posits that children add words to their lexicons through item-specific learning rather than through developmental stages (see Nation & Castles, 2017). For self-teaching to be successful, a child must have phonemic awareness, letter sound knowledge, be able to decode, and have a representation of the target word in her oral vocabulary (see Elbro, de Jong, Houter, D., & Nielsen, 2012). In a quasiregular orthography like English (the relationship between orthography and phonology is systematic but admits many exceptions), however, there are inevitable encounters with words that can be only partially decoded by the application of decoding rules, resulting in a mismatch between the decoded form and word pronunciation. Set for variability (Gibson & Levin, 1975; Venezky, 1999) is seen as a process that "cleans up" this mismatch between orthography to phonology conversion and word pronunciation (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012). For example, a young reader may decode *wasp* to rhyme with *clasp*, however upon recognizing that /*wæsp*/ is not a real word, she must then flexibly apply different pronunciations for the letter *a* to arrive at the word, which is in her listening vocabulary. There is increasing evidence within the literature implicating the role of semantic and/or phonological clean-up in children's reading of irregular words. For instance, Steacy et al. (2017) recently reported results supporting the role of lexical influence on irregular word reading with vocabulary skill having a direct effect and word imageability acting as a moderator. In addition, connectionist models (i.e., triangle model) of word recognition (Plaut et al., 1996) have shown that the addition of a semantic processor (represented as item-specific knowledge) to a model containing phonological and orthographic processors improves irregular word recognition.

Studies have found that set for variability predicts the reading of irregular words (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012), regular words (Elbro, et al., 2012), and nonwords (Steacy et al., 2019). In these studies, set for variability was considered a general child attribute assessing cognitive flexibility for semantic clean-up by presenting children with spoken regularized pronunciations of irregular words (e.g., /*wæsp*/) and asking

them to identify the real word (i.e., /wasp/). Tunmer and Chapman found that set for variability assessed as a measure of child ability predicted English word reading and decoding in first graders concurrently and longitudinally three years later. Elbro and colleagues reported similar findings in both shallow (Dutch) and deep (Danish) orthographies. Set for variability is related to word reading for both timed and untimed measures (Dyson, Best, Solity, & Hulme, 2017; Kearns, Rogers, Koriakin, & Al Ghanem, 2016) and these effects are stronger for word reading than knowledge of word meaning (Dyson et al.). We model our set for variability assessment on these studies, but we consider set for variability as both a general child skill and a child-by-word[1] predictor specific to each word. We speculate that set for variability is a process related to irregular word reading and item properties make items more or less conducive to the success of that process.

There is emerging evidence that this lexical flexibility can be trained in children (Dyson, Best, Solity, & Hulme, 2017; Savage, Georgiou, Parilla, & Maiorino, 2018; Zipke, 2016). Training protocols have emphasized flexibility in applying different pronunciations for letters or letter combinations (Zipke, 2016), checking for matches and making approximations to known words (Dyson et al., 2017; Savage et al., 2018), and a two-step instructional model where direct instruction in simple decoding was the first step and set for variability flexibility training followed as a second step (Savage et al., 2018).

In the current study we explored the relationship between set for variability (both as item-specific and general predictors) and irregular word reading by decomposing irregular word reading variance into child-, word-, and child-by-word (set for variability) components. We drew on the literature to select relevant characteristics of the child (e.g., set for variability, phonological awareness, rapid automatized naming, vocabulary), the word (e.g., frequency, number of letters, concreteness, relative transparency), and the child-by-word (e.g., item level set for variability performance) as predictors . We extend the literature by asking grades 2-5 children to read a subset of the set for variability items (i.e., the dependent measure of irregular word reading; see Appendix A) and used the set for variability mispronunciation task as an item-level predictor of irregular word reading, while simultaneously exploring the role of other important child- and word-level predictors. We included as a word-level predictor a measure assessing each word's relative transparency, using a spelling to pronunciation transparency rating[2]. In doing so, we were able to examine the unique role of child-by-word set for variability (i.e., recognizing /wæsp/ represents /wasp/), general child-level set for variability performance (total performance on all items on the set for variability task), and general word-level transparency in predicting set for variability item reading (correctly reading *wasp* as /wasp/). This allowed us to estimate the separate roles of general and item-specific set for variability ability at the child level and spelling to pronunciation trasparency at the word level in explaining item level variance in irregular word reading.