

The sweaty sounding-out stage builds reading muscle

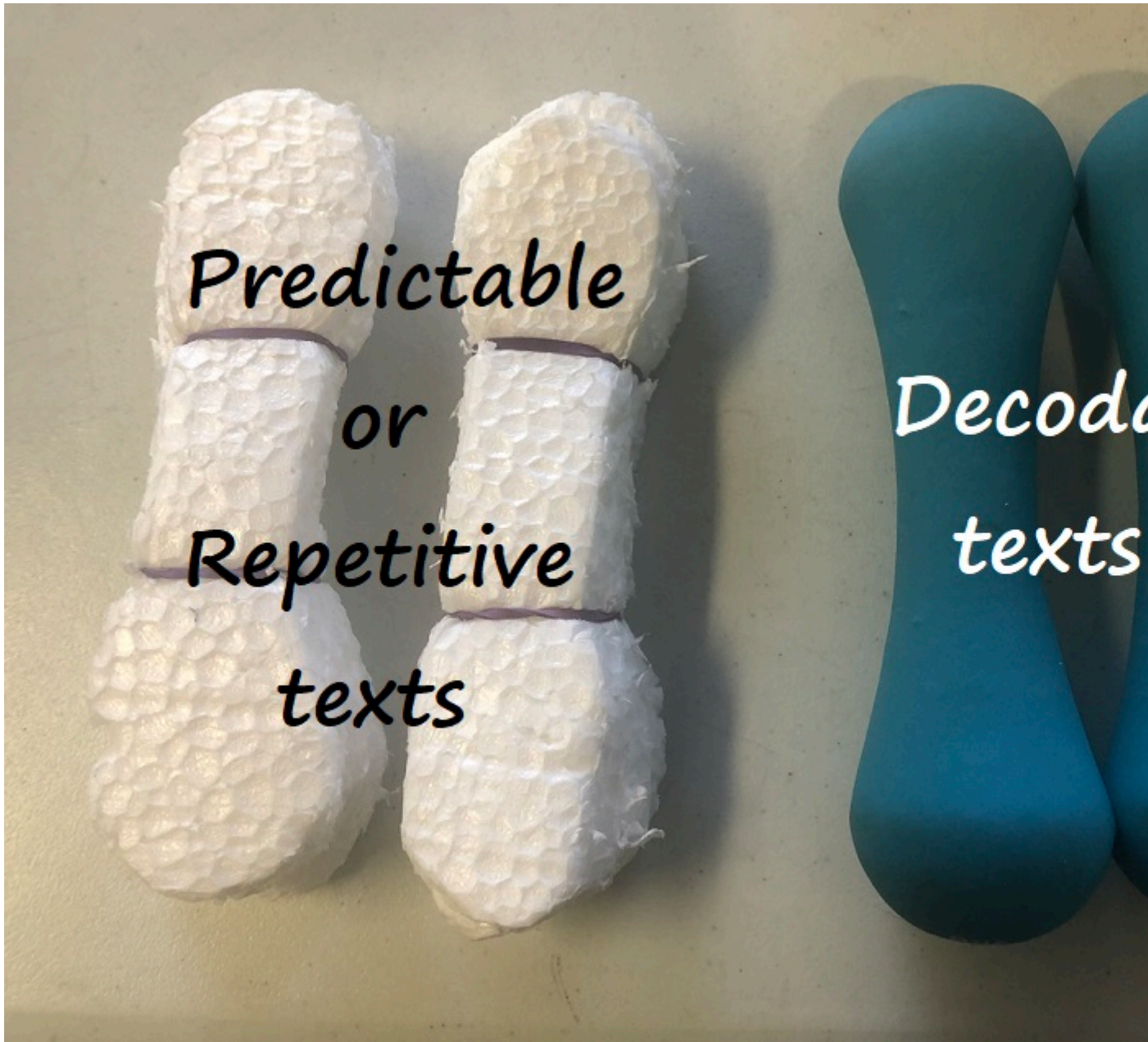
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We want young children's lives to be fun, and free of struggle and hard work. We want them to enjoy reading, like we do. So listening to young children reading simple books containing the spelling patterns they've been taught in phonics lessons ([decodable books](#)) can be quite painful, and a little confronting, for adults.

They grunt and groan and sweat their way through the words. Most of their cognitive horsepower gets used up just extracting the words from the page, and they don't understand much of what they've read. It's certainly not fluent. It looks and sounds more like hard slog than fun.

However, inside a child's brain, something extraordinary is happening. They're creating a new brain circuit linking the visual areas at the back of the brain with the language areas on the left. They're shifting some tasks usually done on the left side over to the right hemisphere, and repurposing left hemisphere brain cells for reading. See [this 2015 blog post](#) for the science behind this.

Lack of understanding of the importance and value of this stage is probably how [predictable/repetitive texts](#) got a foothold in early education. [I detest them](#), because they teach children to fake fluent reading by memorising repetitive sentence stems and guessing the rest from pictures. This is a lot easier for adults to listen to, and if you believe reading should be fluent and easy from the start, it sounds like real reading.



If you went to a gym and they told you their weights were made of polystyrene because lifting real weights makes people sweat and grunt and isn't pretty to watch, you'd walk straight out.

Predictable/repetitive texts are like fake weights at the gym. They make the exercise easier and less painful to watch, but they don't build reading muscle.

Next time you're watching a child slowly and laboriously sounding out words in a well-selected decodable book, cheer them on. Don't wish it wasn't hard or try to make it easier. All that sweating and striving is because they're building their reading brain, which is such a powerful and wonderful thing to do, and well worth the effort.

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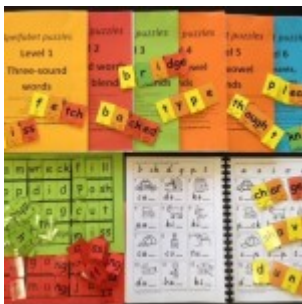
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