

The Effects of the *Language!* Reading Intervention Program  
On  
Reading Performance for Fifth Grade Students in a Title One Elementary School

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

August 2009

Graduate Programs in Education

Goucher College

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of using *Language!* Reading Intervention Program on the reading performance of fifth grade students in the areas of fluency and comprehension development. A pre test and post test, quasi-experimental design was selected for use in this study. All five students selected to participate scored at the lowest performance level on the Maryland School Assessment for 2007-2008 in Reading, and had a history of reading difficulties. All were performing below grade level with delays in reading, writing, and spelling. An additional five students also taught by the investigator served as the control group. The *Language!* Reading Intervention Program was implemented daily from October 2008 through May 2009. Analysis of the data suggested some support for the effectiveness of the intervention program compared to regular instruction.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Many children experience difficulties acquiring basic reading skills such as decoding, comprehension, and fluency in spite of having average intelligence and adequate opportunities to learn ( Ransinki & Padak, 2001). One source of these difficulties may be found in the differences in cultures, family structure, and abilities that students bring to the classroom (Richek, et al, 2002). When these differences in learning are not fully addressed in instruction, students fail to develop skills in reading. They come to see themselves as “poor” readers and tend avoid reading as an activity. As a result, they miss opportunities to develop their vocabulary knowledge and reading skill and fall even further behind their classmates (Callella, 2003). Many of these children have special needs such as language disabilities, further contributing to their difficulties with basic reading and comprehension.

Because so many reading/writing/ and spelling disabled students never are identified and provided with appropriate instructional intervention, the problems extend far beyond the realm of the special education classrooms. A significant number of students enter the upper primary grades with notable deficits in their reading abilities. Teachers at these grade levels find themselves having to teach basic reading skills, and in many cases need more training in order to properly teach students.

Because deficiency in reading skills is so widespread among students, researchers have studied it extensively. They have found that it is important for students to learn to read efficiently, expressively, and meaningfully so that they can construct meaning easily (Richek, et al, 2002). In other words, they must become fluent readers. Fluency involves more than accurate word recognition; fluent readers read to understand the meaning of text they are reading. Fluency is measured by the number of words read correctly per minute. Most fluency measures take into account both reading rate and accuracy, both of which can be quantified. Research such as that reported by Greene (2009) suggests that students who fail to acquire sufficient phonemic awareness, knowledge of phonics, and spelling and writing skills will continue to struggle to become fluent readers if these skills are not addressed. Meeting the instructional needs of these students so that they become fluent readers requires a comprehensive approach to skill development.

*Language!* is a comprehensive literacy curriculum developed by Jane Fell Greene, Ed.D. and published in 2009 by Sopris West Educational Services. This curriculum is based upon research findings suggesting that struggling literacy learners need interventions focusing on both the word level and on comprehension skills (Greene, 2007). At the word level, word recognition and spelling components teach students how the use of sound spelling correspondence can help them to read and spell words. In addition, *Language!* provides decoding/encoding, fluency, and comprehension instruction according to assessed student needs. *Language!* helps students learn the skills and concepts they need to progress from below grade level to a 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

*Language!* is a research-based intervention designed for English Language Learners, students for whom existing curriculum has been ineffective, and students with language-based learning difficulties. This researcher became interested in examining the impact of using *Language!* in her role as an elementary school reading specialist. Because many of the students taught by the investigator used the *Language!* program, the researcher wished to determine the effects of the program on these students.

### **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether instruction through *Language!* improves reading comprehension for struggling readers enrolled in a Title One elementary school.

### **Hypothesis**

The reading performance of fifth grade struggling readers will improve when they receive *Language!* Reading Intervention Program compared to similar students who do not receive this program.

### **Operational Definitions**

Fluency will be measured by the number of words read correctly per minute from pre test and post test information on the Test of Silent Contextual Reading Fluency. Comprehension will be measured by pre test and post test performance on the *Language!* Reading Scale.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review explores the importance of reading comprehension for students' success in school and examines interventions that can help students overcome barriers to effective reading comprehension. Section one presents components of reading comprehension and explains its importance for student learning. Section two describes the characteristics of effective instruction in reading comprehension. Section three examines a variety of barriers to successful reading comprehension. The fourth section discusses intervention programs and strategies that positively impact students' reading achievement.

#### **Importance of Reading Comprehension**

Comprehension is the essence of reading; it is the evolution of thought that occurs as individuals read. When reading text, readers continually reconstruct or update the information they are reading (Brozo & Simpson, 2003). True understanding happens when the readers merge their thinking with the text. Brozo and Simpson explain that readers ask questions, draw inferences, think about what is of importance, and summarize and synthesize information. This process enables readers to use their new understanding to ask more questions and guide new learning while enhancing the concept of the real world connection – the “why it is important” link.

Fluency, like comprehension, is another important goal of reading instruction. Fluency is the ability to read with expression, intonation, and at a natural flow (Callella, 2003). A fluent reader reads quickly as he or she focuses on phrased units of meanings (Rasinki & Padak, 2001). In other words, fluent readers are reading for meaning and understanding of what they are reading. When students develop fluency, they learn to break sentences into phrases and chunk words as they read. Moreover, there is consideration of fluency at another level of the passage as a whole to aid understanding between fluency and comprehension. Fluency is measured by the number of words read per minute.

Comprehension is measured in a variety of ways such as students' assignments, how students respond to text-related questions, and how well students perform on standardized tests and informal assessments (Johnson & Barnes, 2008). Reading comprehension is a lifelong skill that is essential for success. Life skills are developed through reading and understanding written directions; comprehension is a predictor of success in school and higher education (Hirsh, 2007).

### **Characteristics of Effective Reading Instruction**

Effective reading instruction should be highly focused, explicit, and well-planned so that both teacher and student know what they are supposed to learn from the instructor. The learning experience provides breadth and depth as it transitions from simple to complex (Klauda & Guthrie, 2008). If the goal of reading is to understand what has been read, then comprehension instruction should focus on the development of transferable strategies that promote independent use of effective thinking while reading (Johnson & Barnes, 2008). In turn, teachers should scaffold activities that promote student achievement. Scaffolding refers to building upon previously taught skills.

Teachers should explain why it is important for students to learn the skill or the strategy under study, guide students in their acquisition of the skill or strategy, while monitoring comprehension (Green, 1996). Green also states "When we model how we read ourselves, we share our struggles as well as our successes, peeling back layers of our thinking and showing kids how we approach text and how understanding happens" (p.196). Using the "think aloud" is one way to make the process concrete. When teachers use this strategy, they share what they are thinking out loud while modeling. The think aloud strategy is used to introduce each Metacognitive strategy (Wilhelm, 2001). Metacognitive strategies refer to one's thinking about his or her thinking. Teachers are able to model their own thinking and learning process. Wilhelm describes thinking aloud as a process that involves both thinking about reading strategies being used as well as the content of what is being read. These think aloud lessons make the comprehension process audible.

Children will learn best when they have the opportunity to learn through repetition and integration of key content and practice critical skills for automaticity, reinforcement, and



application (Callella, 2003). In addition, reading instruction should be informed by and based on meaningful reading assessments (Allinton, 2001). The information received from assessment data will provide information teachers can use for differentiation of instruction so they may offer students individualized help as needed.

### **Barriers to Successful Reading Comprehension**

Currently, educational systems are faced with a wide variety of challenges as they strive to help students achieve academic success. Large numbers of students experience difficulties learning essential reading skills such as word identification and phonological decoding despite the fact that many exhibit average intelligence and have had adequate opportunity to learn (Rasinki & Padak, 2001). Many educators have asserted that phonological awareness of the sound structure of words and the ability to manipulate sounds in words are key components in the process of learning to read. However, despite widespread systematic approaches to teaching phonemic awareness and decoding, a significant number of students have notable deficits in their ability to read for comprehension, exhibit poor decoding skills, and experience difficulty with fluency (Klauda & Guthrie, 2008). By the time students reach the upper-primary grades, they may demonstrate resistance to remediation and they will be beyond the age when reading skills can be taught easily (Reed, J.M., Marchand-Martella, N.E., Martella, R.C., & Kolts, R.L. 2007). The longer the reading problem persists, the more complex and deep-seated the problem becomes.

Over time, persistent reading failure inevitably affects reading-related attitudes and students' willingness to try to be active participants in reading or attempt words they do not know (Callella, 2003). Struggling readers often seek to compare their performance in reading with that of their more able peers who read well (Allinton, 2001). As a result, they often link their lack of success to attributions that are beyond their control such as heredity, poor learning experiences in school, or fate. Many students may have special needs such as language disabilities and difficulties with basic reading and reading comprehension in addition to difficulties with written expression. These students do not have positive academic experiences at school before their reading problems have been identified. Partin and Hendricks (2002) believe reading difficulties often are linked with poor self concept, poor self esteem, and poor academic achievement. High

school students cannot perform at grade level and graduation rates are declining. In addition, there is a high correlation between poor reading skills, high school dropout rates, delinquency, and chronic low employment and underemployment. Hirsh (2007) states that “reading is so critical to success that reading failure not only constitutes an educational problem but also rises to the level of a major health problem” (p.129).

Researchers related to reading difficulties consistently suggest that struggling literacy learners need intervention programs that focus on the word level. These intervention programs include phonemic awareness, phonics, word recognition, and spelling (Rasinki & Padak, 2001). Struggling literacy learners need support in developing skills in comprehension, vocabulary, morphology, grammar, and usage. In addition, students need assistance with listening and reading comprehension skills in conjunction with speaking and writing. Moving from sound to text, curriculum must be taught explicitly to deliver content. Teachers must model skills and strategies that children need to decipher unknown words. Teachers should link prior knowledge and information with new information so students are better able to understand what is taught.

Students struggle with the learning-to-read process for many reasons. Some have language barriers; others have special needs. Some have had little exposure to books and print prior to school entrance (Johnson & Barnes, 2008). Still others simply are late bloomers – children who are not developmentally ready to learn what the school system has designated at their grade level. For children who have not yet developed phonics skills, more specific instruction such as sound matching, sound isolation, sound substitution, and sound segmentation is needed. To meet the needs of these students, teachers plan instruction that includes introduction of phonemic awareness skills in an easy-to-more complex order that eventually leads to learning phonics.

Phonemic awareness is a key element in learning word recognition through phonics and overall reading (Rasinki & Padak, 2001). Acquiring skill with phonics is dependent on the readers’ ability to examine words visually, to recognize segments, and blend sounds that represent letters. For students who have language-based disabilities or hearing impairments, this presents a challenge for their understanding or method of processing information. Rasinki and Padak explain that children most at risk for reading failure are those who enter school with limited exposure to the English language.

Unfortunately, many young children with reading and language disabilities are unidentified until ages 9 to 14, after they already struggled repeatedly with the process. This approach sometimes is called the wait-and-fail approach to identification (Richek, et al, 2002). Phonemic awareness promotes emergent literacy, thus helping students to understand what is read. Other students face learning challenges related to home, societal, and cultural factors. There also are emotional factors to consider such as intelligence, definitions of intelligence and cultural bias in measurements of intelligence. Some tests are designed to focus on specific cultures, or types of students. Such tests put other students at a disadvantage. In addition, students may experience challenges with written, oral, receptive, or expressive language, speech problems, physical disabilities, hearing, visual impairment, neurological factors, gender differences, or other physical problems. Many of these factors truly may not be linked to social or emotional problems or development (Rasiniki & Padak, 2001).

As students move from the primary to intermediate grades, loss of interest in reading can occur and lack of motivation presents new challenges for both teachers and students. These problems increase difficulties with basic reading and reading comprehension skills. The challenge these students encounter could lead to disruptive classroom behavior which may affect the learning environment for other students.

### **Interventions**

Finding ways to teach children who struggle with reading sometimes is a challenge, but it also can be one of the most rewarding aspects of a teacher's job because doing so gives a child the gift of literacy. The most successful interventions tap a single strategy, develop that strategy through longer-term instruction, and provide repeated application of the strategy (Reed, et al, 2007). As compared with traditional instruction that might last one day or, in some cases, for one week, effective strategy teaching often involves four to ten weeks of focused instruction and application of a single strategy. Effective strategy lessons immerse students in teacher demonstrations of the thinking needed for the strategy-in-use, and the application of the strategy across a number of different texts (Pike, Campaign & Mumper, 1997). After the four-to-ten weeks focused on effective strategy use, substantial improvement in comprehension typically has been demonstrated (Klauda & Guthrie, 2008). The greatest improvements often were found

among the lower achieving students. The research on comprehension strategy teaching provides powerful evidence that most struggling readers do benefit significantly when teachers can construct lessons that help make the comprehension visible, such as those described above. Many students develop the strategies they need only with much instructional support.

There should be a practical and theoretical justification for every component and element in the reading program (Shilling, S.G., Carlisle, J.F., Scott, S.E., & Zeng, J., 2007). Several intervention programs that provide such justification currently are available. For example, *Fast Track* is a research based reading program that has high interest reading materials and a strong fluency component, designed to accelerate the delayed reader to grade-level proficiency. The teacher accurately assesses students' needs and then delivers informed, intensive, targeted instruction. The reading components address phonics with direct instruction. The comprehension strand includes reading accuracy and comprehension. There is direct instruction provided for comprehension and writing as well as independent reading with standardized test prep/comprehension assessments. The fluency strand provides guided practice, repeated readings, and independent reading.

*Read Naturally*, another research-based program, is designed to develop readers' skills necessary for fluent and effortless reading (Hasbrouck & Rogers, 1999). The program acknowledges the high correlation that research has shown exists between comprehension and fluency. *Read Naturally* may be used flexibly as a supplement to provide extra practice for young readers, for students learning the English Language, and as an intervention for struggling readers. The repeated readings strategies have been validated through research as being effective for increasing reading speed, a factor in improving reading comprehension (Callella, 2003). The program offers explicit information for proper implementation of the program. Students receive explanations as to why they perform various aspects of the program. Careful monitoring of progress drives instructional practices and alerts teachers to reading problems. Comprehension questions and written retell activities serve as reminders to students of their ultimate goal in achieving understanding.

*Soar to Success* is a reading intervention program for students who are reading below grade level. The primary goal of this intervention program is to accelerate students' reading ability and

to help students quickly apply comprehension and decoding strategies. The program was created to help students develop effective comprehension and decoding strategies, as well as skills needed to become an effective reader. Teacher directed instruction is provided in a small, guided reading groups. *Soar to Success* uses authentic literature with reciprocal teaching strategies. The program establishes a connection to comprehension strategies. Using these strategies can facilitate a deeper understanding of other content areas (Joyce & Showers, 1981). Strong teacher support is released gradually to facilitate student independence.

*Language!* is a comprehensive literacy curriculum. Researchers consistently suggest that struggling literacy learners need interventions focusing both on the word level and on comprehension skills (Greene, 2007). *Language!* is a program designed to provide decoding/encoding, fluency, and comprehension instruction according to assessed student needs. In addition, *Language!* helps students learn the skills and concepts to progress from below grade level to a tenth grade reading level. The intervention program is sequential, motivating, explicit, and systematic. The targeted audience includes English Learners, students for whom existing curriculum has been inappropriate, and students with language-based learning disabilities. The phonemic awareness and phonics components help students learn the building blocks of the English language. The word recognition and spelling components teach students how the use of sound-spelling correspondences can help them to read and spell words. The vocabulary and morphology components enable students to develop meanings of words that they are able to read and spell. The grammar and usage component of the program increases student understanding of sentence parts and patterns. When students are able to understand each component of the program, they integrate listening and reading comprehension. Students are able to learn higher-order reasoning skills when teachers model, discuss, and connect what students already know with what they need to know through careful questions that lead to factual and inferential interpretations of text. *Language!* uses three different levels of the text with increasing difficulty that essentially assist students with developing communication skills through speaking and writing. Writing is a means of extending and deepening students' knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter.

## **Summary**

Comprehension is the essence of reading; it is a guide to developing students' ability to fully understand text by making the comprehension process achievable, accessible, and incremental. Students must be taught how to develop abstract thinking into understanding in which their prior learning is connected with their new learning. All students do not learn in a similar manner and interventions must be in place to address the needs of various types of learners. It is important that educators become better informed and more critical of the claims of various intervention programs, both positive and negative. Educators must become more skillful in understanding and teaching reading, as well as in helping those students with challenges in reading experience success. Reading is an essential skill for success in school, in life, and for life-long learning.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

The researcher used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design to examine the effectiveness of the Language! Intervention program on the reading skills of low- performing students selected from an intact classroom.

#### **Participants**

The ten students who participated in the study, five of whom received the *Language!* Reading Intervention Program, were all enrolled in a Title One elementary school located in Baltimore Maryland. All five students who received the intervention program had scored at the lowest performance level on the 2007-2008 Maryland School Assessment in Reading. All students had a history of reading difficulties, and all were performing below grade level with delays in reading, writing, and spelling. The students included two females, ages 11 and 12, one of whom had been retained one grade level at a previous school. The study also included three 11-year old males. Two were African American and one was a Hispanic student. All students come from Low SES backgrounds. The control group consisted of students enrolled at the same school and matched in terms of demographics.

#### **Instrument**

The Baseline Assessment consists of four components that measure literacy skills (Greene, 2009). These components are intended to provide reliable and valid measures of contextual reading. Separate scores are provided for each component. The first component, the Test of Silent Contextual Reading Fluency, measures the speed and accuracy with which students can recognize the individual words in a series of printed passages that become progressively more difficult in their content, vocabulary, and grammar. Scores include number of words read per minute, fluency, and rate of accuracy, measured by words read-per -minute. The second component, the *Language!* Reading Scale, tests the students' ability to construct meaning while reading a passage from which words have been deleted (cloze procedure). When the missing word is considered within the context of the surrounding text, the child must base comprehension on the text surrounding the word. The performance is reported using the Lexile Framework for

Reading. The Lexile Framework is a measurement system that reports student comprehension skills in terms of the complexity level of the text that the students can read with 75 per cent comprehension (Greene, 2009). The third component, the Test of Written Spelling, is a norm-referenced test of spelling. Performance is reported as a percentile score based on norms generated by a sample of students drawn from grades 1 through 12. The assessment has consistent high reliability and a demonstrated degree of validity. This is noteworthy because it demonstrates that it does measure written spelling and measures the ability to spell dictated words in written form (Greene, 2009).

The fourth component is writing. Students demonstrate what they know about writing. All four components were administered as pre- and post- tests. The *Language!* Reading Test was normed on a nationally representative sample of students who took all four forms of the assessments. The test provides raw scores, standard scores, percentiles, and grade equivalents (Greene, 2009).

### **Procedure**

A review of student performance on the Maryland State Assessment in reading in the fall of 2008, led to the identification of five students in grade five who were in need of intensive reading intervention. *The Language!* Intervention program was selected for these students because of the consistency between the students' needs and the instructional approach taken by the program. The students received instruction 90 minutes daily from October, 2008 through May, 2009. Students were pretested on the schools system's Reading Benchmark assessment at the beginning, middle, and end of the year along with others in their grade level. In March, all students took the Maryland School Assessment in Reading. At the same time, a control group of similar students was indentified and tested. Data were compiled by the investigator.

The implementation of the study followed recommended protocol for delivering the program, which is described below. The *Language!* Intervention Program addresses fluency and comprehension in a cumulative, integrative lesson plan structure with explicit instruction. The 90 minute daily instruction, explicitly taught, is distributed strategically across the six steps from sound to text. Step One requires ten minutes and teaches Phonemic Awareness and Phonics. This step helps students learn through explicit instruction in phoneme awareness and phoneme manipulation, while developing letter-sound and letter-name fluency and automaticity. This



instruction focuses on morpheme awareness as well as syllable awareness and identification. Step Two requires 10 minutes of instruction and includes Word Recognition and Spelling. This instruction teaches students how to use the sound-spelling correspondence to read words fluently and spell words accurately. Step Three requiring 15 minutes of instruction, teaches Vocabulary and Meaning and develops the meaning of words students can read and spell. Step Four, involving 15 minutes of instruction, includes Grammar and Usage and increases understanding of sentence parts and patterns. Step Five, requiring 20 minutes and focusing upon Listening and Comprehension, teaches comprehension using three different levels of text, each with an increasing level of difficulty. Finally, Step Six requires 20 minutes of instruction and includes Speaking and Writing. This instruction develops students' communication skills through speaking and writing.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The hypothesis that students who received instruction in reading through the *Language!* Program would demonstrate an improved reading rate, improved accuracy, and an improved reading comprehension skill was partially supported. As Table 1 below shows, the experimental group and the control group were significantly different only on the posttest of student comprehension. Results of the test favored the experimental group. However, on all three measures, students in the experimental group demonstrated some improvement from pre- to posttest whereas students in the control group remained unchanged. The small group size greatly reduced the power of the statistical test to detect difference (Type 2 error).

Table 1. A Comparison of Pre and Posttest Performance on the Language! Assessment

Variable Measured	Administration	Experimental Group			Control Group			Mean Difference
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Rate+	Pretest	5	49.00	25.64	5	63.40	8.38	14.40 (t =1.19; ns)
	Posttest	5	60.80	14.25	5	63.80	17.19	3.00 (t<1; ns)
Accuracy++	Pretest	5	59.51	20.68	5	80.69	33.25	21.17(t = 1.20; ns)
	Posttest	5	74.75	12.42	5	84.18	25.80	9.43 (t<1; ns)
Comprehension+++	Pretest	5	39.59	8.84	5	37.96	9.91	1.63 (t<1; ns)
	Posttest	5	67.76	8.08	5	40.41	9.50	27.35 (t = 4.90; p<.001)

+Number of words read within one minute

++Per cent words read correctly

+++ Per cent Comprehension items answered correctly

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students who received reading instruction through *Language!* Intervention Program (treatment group) will demonstrate greater improvement in reading rate, reading accuracy, and reading comprehension skills compared to students who received only classroom instruction (control group). The hypothesis that the treatment group will demonstrate higher performance than the control group was supported for reading comprehension only. However, all five students in the experimental group demonstrated improvement from pre-to posttest, suggesting that the *Language!* Reading Intervention Program does improve reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

#### **Threats to Validity**

This study contained some threats to validity. Two of these include small group size and experimenter effect, arising from the interest of the investigator, who also delivered the treatment, in the outcome of the study. The small size not only reduces the power of a statistical test to detect real differences but it also limits the generalizations that can be made from the study. Concerning the investigator, another possible source of invalidity may lie in the relationship between the participants and the investigator who also served as their reading teacher. Post test results could reflect the experimental group students' desire to perform well in order to please the investigator (their teacher). In addition, the investigator is strongly supportive of the program, and that bias could affect results.

A third validity concern has to do with the amount of time students in the treatment group spent studying reading. It is not clear whether students in the treatment group, as compared to the control group, received equal amounts of instructional time. Issues about group equivalence also could

be important. The treatment group included five students selected because they had scored at the lowest performance level on the 2007-2008 Maryland School Assessment in Reading. The five

students from the control group, who had a history of below-grade level performance in reading, were selected from a fifth grade class from the same school.

### **Relationship To Related Research**

The results in this study do offer support for the hypothesis that the *Language!* Reading Intervention Program improves reading comprehension of struggling readers although its advantage compared to traditional classroom instruction is uncertain. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that struggling learners can benefit from an intervention program (cf. Rasinski & Paddak, 2001). The structured and comprehensive approach provided by *Language!* is also supported by research. The National Institute for Child Health and Human Development cites explicit instruction as a useful support to increase comprehension. Research from the National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read*, (2000) indicates that explicit instruction for text comprehension teaches students to use specific cognitive strategies when they encounter barriers to comprehension when reading. Additional research provides guidance concerning instructional practices that seem to be helpful in developing students' reading skills. According to research by Louisa Moats and Carol Tolman, (2008) proficient reading depends on many skills including phoneme awareness, use of phonics to decode words accurately and automatic recognition of words previously deciphered. In addition, to become proficient readers, students must acquire (1) vocabulary knowledge, (2) the ability to construct meaning and to connect ideas to text using their prior knowledge, and (3) the habit of continually monitoring their understanding as they read.

### **Implication for Future Research**

Based on the results of this study and the investigator's observation of the students who received the intervention, it is recommended that the study be replicated with a larger group of students. Additional research might be conducted at different grade levels, and might include equivalent amounts of reading instructional time for experimental and control group students.

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