

Florida Center for Reading Research

LANGUAGE!

What is *LANGUAGE!?*

LANGUAGE! is a comprehensive literacy curriculum that integrates reading, spelling, writing, and other critical language arts strands. It is designed for students performing two or more years behind grade-level placement. *LANGUAGE!* is designed specifically for students who benefit from explicit instruction in a structured language curriculum, whether they are in the general or special education program. The classroom teacher delivers sequenced, systematic, cumulative and explicit instruction in two daily sessions that total 90 minutes. The program is highly individualized, with students placed at an instructional level on the basis of an entry assessment, and continuing on that level until mastery of concepts and skills is attained. Flexible, small instructional groups are formed within the whole class according to mastery performance. During teacher directed small group instruction other students may be assigned: 1) practice to build fluency in sorting, categorizing, grammar, and writing, 2) independent reading at their independent reading level, and 3) journal writing.

The curriculum is comprised of three levels, or 54 units. Level 1 (units 1-18) is designed for readability level primer-2.5, readability for Level 2 (units 19-36) is 2.5-6.0, and Level 3's (units 37-54) readability is 6.0-9.0. Levels 1 and 2 will be the focus of this report. It is recommended that approximately one year be devoted to each level of the curriculum, though this will vary depending on the students' entry point and learning pace. A series of increasingly difficult decodable readers, *The J & J Language Readers*, accompanies the curriculum. These readers include activities related to various aspects of the curriculum, which are to be completed prior to reading, during reading, and after reading. These activities include vocabulary expansion exercises, a pre-reading summary, writing extension activities, and a series of questions for discussion based on all levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy.

There are sixteen strands of curriculum content reflecting different facets of language, writing, and reading instruction, with a master lesson plan provided for the teacher for each unit. Examples of strands include phonemic awareness, phoneme-grapheme associations, word recognition, comprehension, spelling, grammar and usage, syntax and sentence structure, semantic relationships and morphology. An instructional resource guide and supplementary books and materials offer the teacher all items that are needed for implementation of the program. The underlying progression of the content moves from phonemic skills through connected text. The *LANGUAGE!* lesson plans systematically guide teachers through this logical progression each day. Students establish a strong foundation in and understanding of the structure and function of the English language.

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Consumable student materials, which incorporate numerous content strands, are coordinated with each instructional unit. Students complete a variety of interrelated activities within each unit, though they are not required to practice independently any concepts that they have not been directly and explicitly taught previously. Oral exercises and practice always precede written work of the same skill. In addition to the use of consumable materials, small group, and folder activities, students write in journals and read independently each day. Level 1 students also practice phonemic awareness daily for 5 to 10 minutes. Because students work with a

concept until mastery, defined by *LANGUAGE!* as automatic application of skills and concepts at an 80% correct level, they progress through the program at different rates.

Is *LANGUAGE!* aligned with Reading First?

LANGUAGE! addresses each of the five areas of reading instruction identified by Reading First as being critical to the development and mastery of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The *LANGUAGE!* program comes with its own book of phonemic awareness activities, which include rhyming, production, isolation, segmentation, blending, deletion, substitution, and reversal of phonemes. Phonics is directly taught by linking the correct letter symbol to the phonemes. Vocabulary development is taught through a study of structures including comparative forms, tenses, and affixes, and Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots. In addition, oral/listening vocabulary instruction supplements the concepts of each *J & J Language Reader* story. Fluency is stressed not only through daily independent reading, but also through direct practice of timed readings of words, phrases, and passages. Many comprehension exercises and teacher support materials are provided to aid in the instruction of specific reading comprehension strategies, such as graphic organizers, pictorial sequencing aids, and semantic maps.

Professional development for elementary level instruction, grades 1-3, includes a 3-day training for Level 1, followed by ongoing support and a 2-day training for Level 2. Since this is a comprehensive and cumulative language arts curriculum that incorporates systematic instruction at multiple levels of reading and language complexity, adequate professional development and ongoing support are particularly important to its effective implementation. Districts and schools that select *LANGUAGE!* as an approach to help children who are struggling in learning to read should be prepared to provide for the ongoing professional development that this program requires.

Research Support for *LANGUAGE!*



LANGUAGE! was introduced in 1994-95 as a comprehensive reading/language arts curriculum for nonreaders, second language learners, students with special education needs, and below average readers. A study using a research design that included a control group was undertaken with 45 middle and high school juvenile offenders (Greene, 1996). The average time of individual student engagement with the *LANGUAGE!* program was 22.7 weeks. A control group of 51 similarly adjudicated youth were provided instruction that, in contrast to *LANGUAGE!*, was unstructured and whole-group rather than individualized. Three assessment measures were used to evaluate students' language growth: the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-3, Wiederholt & Bryant, 1992), the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT-R, Wilkinson, 1993) and the written expression subtest of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT-R, Markwardt, 1989). Although the students in the experimental group were significantly language delayed in comparison to those in the control group, the treatment group gains were statistically significant for all measures. The gains were judged as being educationally meaningful as well, as "students in the treatment group gained an average of more than three grades in word identification, spelling, comprehension, and composition during a typical six month enrollment period" (Greene, 1996, p.115).

While the majority of studies conducted regarding the efficacy of the *LANGUAGE !* curriculum have involved middle and high school students, a recent study reported by *LANGUAGE!* described the growth in oral reading fluency of 30 third grade students from Baldwin County, Alabama. Using DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency to document growth, the *LANGUAGE !* students progressed from 34 words correct per minute (WCPM) on average in the fall 2001 to almost 69 WCPM in the fall 2002. The performance range within which students are considered to be at-risk for reading failure, according to DIBELS, is below 70 WCPM. At the beginning of the school year, all but one student in the sample scored in this at-risk range, whereas after one full calendar year of *LANGUAGE !*, 42% of the sample (13 students) achieved fluency rates above 70 WCPM.

Additionally, one study in Idaho was implemented with 3rd through 6th grade special education students in four elementary schools in the 2000-2001 school year. The *LANGUAGE!* curriculum was implemented from October through May, 5 days per week, for 30-90 minutes each day. Instructional groups varied in size from one to ten students. Gains were measured using the Woodcock-Johnson Basic Reading subtests (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989). Results indicated growth between 8 months and 1.3 years on Letter Word Identification, Word Attack (word decoding), and Passage Comprehension for all four grades. It is not clear which gains reached statistical significance, and no control group was included in this study.

In the Sacramento City Unified School District the *LANGUAGE!* program was implemented during the 1998-99 school year with students in 6th, 7th, 8th, and 10th grades who were enrolled in three schools. In these schools the majority of students (83%) were performing below the 25th percentile in reading on the Stanford Achievement Test (1996). Instruction was delivered in two periods totaling 90 minutes per day by language arts and English teachers. Selected subtests from three standardized instruments (Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised, Woodcock Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised, and the Multilevel Academic Survey Test, or MAST, 1985) were used as pre- and posttest measures. On the WRAT-R, gains in spelling for grades 6, 7, and 8 were statistically significant, but the actual spelling level of the students remained low. Two of the four grades showed statistically significant gains on the WJ-R Word Attack subtest, while three of the four grades showed statistically significant gains on the Letter Word Identification subtest. Scores in all grades indicated percentile growth on the MAST, but it was not noted whether or not this improvement reached statistical significance.

Since no control groups were used in the Baldwin County, Idaho Falls or Sacramento City studies, it is not possible to determine whether or not the gains seen in these two studies were attributable solely to implementation of the *LANGUAGE!* curriculum, or whether other factors might have been involved. Nevertheless, the improvements in student performance and the resultant indications of the efficacy of the *LANGUAGE!* program are very encouraging. *LANGUAGE!* is currently seeking a sponsor to undertake more studies that incorporate the use of control groups. We conclude that preliminary research results are very promising for *LANGUAGE!*, and that future studies with a more rigorous scientific design will contribute to our knowledge of the effectiveness of the program.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *LANGUAGE!*:

- *LANGUAGE!* is an extremely thorough presentation of numerous reading, writing, and language arts strands, taught systematically in parallel fashion to children of all ages with delays in reading, writing, and/or language.
- The instructor's manual and instructor's resource guide offer many materials to assist in teaching the content of the program, as well as substantial background information about the knowledge required to effectively teach the content.
- *LANGUAGE!* is highly structured and individualized, offering each student a step-by-step progression through the curriculum at his or her own pace.
- Detailed Lesson Plans for each unit tie together the many materials, sources, and activities in the program that are needed for instruction.

Weaknesses of *LANGUAGE!*:

- The majority of the research for *LANGUAGE!* has been conducted with middle and high school students; more studies with elementary school students are needed.

Which Florida counties have schools that implement *LANGUAGE!*?

There are currently no elementary programs implementing *LANGUAGE!* in Florida. However, there are three counties that are using it at the middle school level. These counties are Leon (850-487-7147), Sarasota (941-927-9000), and Volusia (386-734-7190). The closest county geographically to Florida that uses *LANGUAGE!* at the elementary level is Baldwin County, Alabama (contact: 251-209-5319).

For More Information

<http://www.language-usa.net>

References

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Lead Reviewer: Carol Robinson, Ph.D.
Date Posted: November, 2002

Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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