

A Correlational Study of the Relationship of ELL Student Success on STAR and
WASL Reading Tests of 3rd Grade ELL Students at McClure Elementary School
Yakima Washington

A Special Project

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FACULTY APPROVAL

A Correlational Study of the Relationship of ELL Student

Success on STAR and WASL Reading Tests of

3rd Grade ELL Students at

McClure Elementary School, Yakima, Washington

Approved for the Faculty

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether a correlation existed between ELL student's success on the Renaissance Learning's STAR Reading test, and their success on the reading portion of the WASL. To accomplish this purpose, a review of selected literature was conducted, essential baseline data and information was obtained and analyzed, and related conclusions and recommendations were formulated. Data analyzed supported the hypothesis that there was a positive relationship between spring, 2008 STAR reading scores and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores of 3rd grade MES students at .05 and .01. The hypothesis was not supported at .001.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background for the Project

"Norm-referenced, standardized tests will never tell anyone all that students know, let alone what they can do with their knowledge" (Blasi, 2005). In the above statement, Blasi suggested that public education teachers in today's schools have found that standardized tests are not absolute indicators of student ability.

In the Yakima Valley in Washington State, one subgroup of students who have routinely failed to succeed on the reading portion of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) was the Limited English population more commonly referred to as English Language Learners (ELL). Teachers often asked for a test that could be administered by them to assess a student's likelihood of succeeding on the WASL. If such a test existed, teachers could more easily focus instruction and provide supplemental services to all students.

English Language Learners in the Yakima School District (YSD) have continued to fail annual Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as measured by the reading portion of the WASL. Spring WASL scores for 2001 indicated that only 27.7% of fourth grade ELL students in Yakima School District (YSD) passed the

WASL reading exam, compared to 32.2% of the same group in 2008. Most YSD educators agreed, there was much work to be done.

McClure Elementary School (MES) reading scores showed good progress had been made with ELL students along with significant WASL reading progress. Washington Assessment of Student Learning results for spring of 2001 revealed that 22.2% of the ELL population passed the reading WASL. The high point for MES ELL students occurred during spring 2006 when 60.9% ELL students passed the reading WASL. However, that number declined to 40% during the spring of 2008.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers at MES used the STAR Reading test to determine students' grade equivalent in reading from 2000 – 2008. During this time WASL reading scores have fluctuated. English Language Learner students did not meet AYP in reading in 2008. The staff was concerned and wanted to know if the STAR reading test correlated to WASL reading scores.

Phrased as a question, the problem was represented the focus of the present study was: To what extent did a correlation exist between STAR reading success and WASL reading success among 3rd grade participating students?

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether a correlation existed between ELL student's success on the Renaissance Learning's STAR Reading test, and their success on the reading portion of the WASL. To accomplish this purpose, a review of selected literature was conducted, essential baseline data and information was obtained and analyzed, and related conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

Delimitations

The students included in the study were third grade ELL students at MES. The STAR Reading test was administered to entire MES third grade classrooms by the classroom teacher. The test administration date was determined by the classroom teacher as long as it was contained within the window from February to April of 2008. It was up to the individual classroom teacher to determine whether to administer the test as a whole group or to test individually as time allowed. The teacher could also determine if the test would be completed over several days on classroom computers as time allowed or, if the whole class would travel to the computer lab to take the test at the same time. The teacher also had discretion to decide which activity students would be allowed to engage in when the test was completed.

The WASL was administered to the same student population. The school had organized a WASL team to deal with issues such as: how long each subsection should require for completion; sending students who required more time to an alternate testing site; allowing students who completed the day's test to read a book for pleasure; or complete any teacher approved activity other than sitting at their desk. The WASL team also determined when each test would be administered, and as a result, every student present on the test day took the same test at the same time.

The STAR Reading test was comprised of a 25 question timed computer examination. Students were given a set amount of time to answer each question; based on the student answer questions were automatically amended electronically. Teachers could then instantly print reports on student success including instructional reading level, grade level equivalent, and percentile rank.

The WASL test was comprised of a series of subtests. Responses to the WASL questions were recorded with pencil in a test book provided by the State of Washington. Teachers did not receive feedback from this test until the following fall.

Assumptions

Teachers who proctored the STAR Reading and WASL tests were certified to teach. Those who administered the WASL had completed WASL proctor training. The researcher, Lisa M. Cyr, assumed all students tried their best and that participating teachers took the testing process seriously. Washington Assessment of Student Learning testing was administered by classroom teachers as the state, district, and school WASL team had intended all tests be administered.

Hypothesis

There would be a significant correlation between students who were successful on the STAR Reading test and WASL reading test.

Null Hypothesis

There would be no significant relationship between students who were successful on the STAR Reading test and WASL reading scores. Significance was determined for $p \geq$ at .05, .01, .001 levels.

Significance of the Project

English Language Learner students were one of the lowest performing subgroups at MES by their high stakes reading test results such as the WASL. Washington Assessment of Student Learning scores have been used to determine success on many levels of our educational system. If this study determined there was a significant correlation between success on the reading WASL test and success on the STAR Reading test, the MES staff could then use STAR Reading results to focus appropriate reading instruction for individual students. By the time WASL results were received and reviewed by school staff the students were in the next grade level and on to new challenges. The ability to utilize an assessment tool in the classroom to indicate standardized test success was needed by classroom teachers in order to enhance instruction. If WASL success could be determined with a test at the teacher's disposal, then appropriate instruction would also be more timely.

Procedure

The study was conducted at MES in the spring of 2008. All 3rd grade students took the STAR Reading test between February and April of 2008. From the results of the test a rank order of ELL students was established.

In April of 2008 all students completed the reading portion of the 3rd grade WASL. When WASL results were released the researcher identified those ELL

students who had taken the STAR Reading test and who had also taken the WASL reading test. The 19 matching student WASL reading scores were then ranked and recorded for each qualifying student. The Spearman Rho formula was then used to calculate results.

Definition of Terms

Significant terms used in the context of the present study have been defined as follows:

building assessment coordinator. Staff member hired by a school district to coordinate building testing and serve as the chain of custody representative for testing materials coming from the school district to the school building.

correlational research. Research that involves collecting data to determine whether, and to what degree, a relationship exists between two or more quantifiable variables.

limited english proficient. Students participating in the state transitional bilingual education program. They were also referred to as ELL or ESL.

norm referenced tests. A scoring approach in which an individual's performance on an assessment was compared to the performance of others.

proctor training. A training session administered by the BAC to any staff member who would take part in administering the WASL.

Spearman rho. A measure of correlation appropriate when the data for at least one of the variables were expressed as rank or ordinal data; it produces a coefficient between -1.00 and +1.00.

standardized test. A test that was given and scored in a uniform manner.

STAR Reading test. A computer-adaptive test, which meant that the level of difficulty of the questions administered to each student depends on the student's previous answers. It was also a standardized test, which means that specific procedures should be followed to administer the test to every student every time.

Washington Assessment of Student Learning. A high stakes statewide achievement test administered in Washington State public schools.

WASL team. A team organized by the school's BAC and principal. The team was comprised of a certified representative from 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades. All suggestions made by the team were approved by the building administration and discussed with all staff involved.

Acronyms

AYP. Adequate Yearly Progress

BAC. Building Assessment Coordinator

ELL. English Language Learners

ESL. English as a Second Language

IEP. Individual Education Plan

MES. McClure Elementary School

WASL. Washington Assessment of Student Learning

YSD. Yakima School District

CHAPTER 2

Review of Selected Literature

Introduction

Several related research topics and themes emerged while conducting the review of selected literature presented in Chapter 2. For example, numerous authorities in the area of Bilingual Education (BLE) emphasize the need for educators to understand the unique characteristics of BLE/ESL students as related to their learning needs. The recent influence of high stakes standardized tests on education in general also received considerable attention from informed sources. Additionally, the writer (Lisa M. Cyr) explored current research related to the performance of ELL students on standardized tests. Each of the related research

subtopics has been addressed in depth on the following pages. Finally, a summary of major research themes emanating from the review of selected literature had been provided.

Bilingual Students.

According to Waters (2007), in the past decade or more, the demographics of United States elementary and secondary schools trends have changed considerably due to record-high immigration. English Language Learners (ELL), now make up a greater proportion of the K-12 population than ever before.

Waters cited statistics compiled by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs which indicated that, from 1989-1990 and 2004-2005, enrollment of ELL students in US schools increased 150 percent, from roughly 2 million to well over 5 million.

Waters emphasized that ESL teachers have found it necessary to contend with this major paradigm shift. Waters quoted veteran ESL teacher Judie Haynes as follows:

Kids are not learning in the same way anymore. They've been surrounded by computers all their lives. The key is adapting to the needs and sensibilities of the students you have. I've been teaching for 26 years, and

I'm of the persuasion that we have to sell the product to the audience we have in front of us (p. 34) .

Research conducted by Cartledge & Kourea (2008) and Wagner & Cameto (2004) focused on culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (i.e., African, Hispanic, and Native American). According to these authorities CLD students were characterized by a high school dropout rate, disproportionate special education placements, greater failure in meeting the state and national standards across basic subjects, and the poorest outcomes of all students in our schools.

According to Williamson, Bondy, et al., (2005), ELL students have often been referred to as diverse learners or at-risk groups due to their lack of facility with utilization of the English language. In response to this concern, the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) has synthesized research across multiple at-risk groups and developed five generic principles to guide the instruction of diverse learners as described below:

- a) facilitating learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students,
- b) developing students' competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities,
- c) contextualizing teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of

home and community, d) challenging students toward cognitive complexity, and e) engaging students through dialogue, especially instructional conversations (p. 81).

Miller & Endo (2004) were in agreement that when a lack of background knowledge was needed to complete an assignment or, when learning new information was added to language difficulties, students experienced a heavy cognitive load, which was usually lightened if the students were at least able to draw on their own experience and knowledge.

According to Valencia & Buly (2004), school districts and schools needed to rethink the support they offered ELLs both in terms of providing more sustained instructional support over time and scaffolding their integration into the regular classroom. Related research findings produced by Curry (2007) identified five features that contributed to ELL success, including:

- 1) a positive school environment that appreciates cultural and individual differences;
- 2) a challenging curriculum that is meaningful and incorporates higher level thinking;
- 3) a program model, grounded in sound theory and best practices and associated with enrichment rather than remediation;
- 4) knowledgeable teachers who understand bilingualism and

second language development; and 5) a meaningful dialogue with families, connecting the home with the school (p. 56).

The Recent Influence of Standardized Tests.

The Renaissance Learning Corporation, publishers of the STAR reading test, have described that as a computer-adaptive, norm-referenced reading exam and database as a periodic progress-monitoring system. Research conducted during the development of STAR Reading confirms that the test is reliable, valid, and correlated with high-stakes standardized reading tests (<http://research.renlearn.com/research/133.asp>).

A conservative attack on public schools that began in the early 1980's under President Ronald Reagan, has morphed into the educational reform movement of the 1990's, as symbolized by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation implemented by United States Congress in 2001 (Selwyn, 2007). As a result of this action, standardized state testing was required to assess whether schools, districts, and states were meeting AYP expectations. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) of Washington State, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) measures student learning of the state's academic standards. Students are tested each spring in grades 3-8 and 10 in reading and math. Students also are tested in writing in grades 4, 7 and

10 and science in grades 5, 8 and 10. Success on the tenth grade WASL was established as a requirement for graduation from Washington State public schools (<http://www.k12.wa.us/assessment/default.aspx>).

The intent of the federal NCLB Act was to ensure that all students acquired knowledge and skills needed to achieve their dreams and to be productive and engaged citizens. The law required that all students achieve state standards in reading and mathematics by 2014. Although this represented an ambitious goal to be reached in very short time, and educators were committed to working toward this goal (Washington State AYP Toolkit, 2008).

Kirst, as cited in Hess & Finn Jr. (2004), explained how it has taken more than ten years before earlier federally mandated education programs operated as they were intended. When addressing NCLB and its effects on educators and students, Washington State OSPI Superintendent Terry Bergeson acknowledged the law had gone too far (as cited in Washington State AYP Toolkit, 2008).

As explained by Gentry (2006) educators were often forced to focus more on raising scores while prohibiting today's students a worthwhile education. When educators took time to reflect upon the purpose of NCLB and the outcomes of state mandated standardized tests for those students who were less than high achieving, Gentry to posited, whose interests are at the forefront of educational

reform? Research reviewed by Gentry related to standardized tests led this authority to conclude there had been a massive breakdown in communication in our educational arena. Lawmakers and politicians did not appear to be connecting with those in the educational trenches day in and day out.

Bilingual Students and Standardized Tests.

A study conducted by Escamilla et al. (2005), as reported in *The Journal of Teacher Education* explored current research related to the performance of ELL students on standardized tests. The purpose of this study was twofold. The initial purpose was to question the truth of the assumption that Spanish-speaking students are the reason for the achievement gap and that bilingual education was a main factor. A secondary purpose was to suggest that a need existed for teachers, administrators, and policy makers to question high-stakes testing data rather than merely accepting these data. As stated by these authorities: We argue that politics and high-stakes testing aside, many of our teachers, administrators, and teacher educators have become part of the culture of schooling in the United States that sees language differences as problems to be eradicated rather than resources to be nurtured and developed. They/ we have become members of a culture that tacitly accepts deficit notions of linguistic and cultural diversity. We have taken for granted that differences in high-stakes testing outcomes must mean that Latinos

and Spanish speakers are underachieving and, therefore, the reason that a gap exists. We have been so socialized to see language as a problem that we have difficulties seeing and understanding counterevidence (p. 56).

Escamillia et al. posed and responded to three important research questions related to bilingual students and standardized tests:

1. What is known about the K-12 Latino and Spanish-speaking population in general and their participation in programs of bilingual education in Colorado? In response to this question, the authors found that more than two thirds of the Latino students in Colorado schools identified English as their only language. Therefore, if a gap in achievement on standardized tests between Latino and other students in Colorado exists one should be hesitant in attributing the gap exclusively to Spanish or a language problem. It was also found that 10% of the entire Latino population and only 30% who spoke Spanish were in bilingual education. Thus, bilingual education cannot be the cause of the gap either.

2. How do teachers and other educators in schools with large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELL and Latino students describe Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) achievement outcomes and results at their schools? In response to this question these authorities found teachers' responses to the

researchers' questionnaire indicated they believed that low and unsatisfactory ratings on the state's school accountability reports were the result of teaching in schools with high percentages of Spanish-speaking ELL students who were also impoverished.

3. Is there a gap in achievement between Spanish-speaking ELL Latinos and other students at selected urban schools that are highly affected by linguistic diversity? The authors concluded that when considering results of this Spanish reading achievement tests, Spanish achievement on the CSAP exceeded English achievement in all 14 represented schools. When comparing the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the CSAP in Spanish to the same levels in English, Spanish speaking students in 12 of the 14 schools exceeded the district wide average for English speaking students.

Summary

The review of selected literature and related investigation reported in Chapter 2 supported the following research themes:

1. English Language Learners as a group are very diverse individuals and should not be grouped into one category of the success or failure of a school, district, or state education program.

2. The importance of reading as a necessary societal survival skill was evidenced in the enactment of the 2001 NCLB act.

3. Findings produced from major research studies which focused on ELL students and State Tests of Achievement found an insignificant correlation between ELL students as a whole group and statewide achievement tests.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Treatment of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this quantitative research study was to determine the relationship between STAR Reading test results and reading WASL test results for 3rd grade ELL students at MES. To accomplish this purpose, a review of selected literature was conducted, essential baseline data and information was obtained and analyzed, and related conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology used in the study. Additionally, the researcher included details concerning participants, instruments, design, procedure, treatment of data, and summary.

Methodology

The researcher used a quantitative research methodology involving the Spearman rho correlation coefficient. This measure of correlation is appropriate when the data for at least one of the variables were expressed as rank or ordinal data; it produces a coefficient between -1.00 and +1.00.

Participants

The study included 3rd grade students at MES. Of 84 students who completed the 3rd grade WASL exam and STAR Reading test, 19 were also current ELL students. These students represented a cross-section of ELL students of varying abilities characteristic of YSD.

Instruments

Two essential instruments used in the study included the STAR Reading assessment, in context with the WASL reading assessment.

Design

Fundamental baseline data included STAR Reading assessment student scores as correlated with WASL reading assessment scores. The Spearman rho data analysis was conducted to formulate related inferences, conclusions, and recommendations.

Procedure

Procedures utilized in the present study evolved in several phases, as follows:

1. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from MES building principal, Mr. Del Carmichael, during fall quarter 2008.
2. During spring, 2008, all 3rd grade students at MES were tested using the STAR Reading test.
3. Each 3rd grade classroom teacher tested his/her class using the STAR Reading test.
4. The STAR Reading test was comprised of a 25 question timed computer examination. Students were given one minute to answer each question.
5. At the completion of the test, the teacher had the option of printing a report indicating individual student results.
6. Students were tested for the WASL in large group/general education classrooms, unless they were on an Individualized Education Plan or were ELL students who required language support.
7. Students began the reading portion of the WASL on the first day of the two-week testing period.

8. The WASL proctor read all the directions and sample questions aloud to the students who were then allowed to begin the test and work until that test section was completed. No time limit was required for students when taking the WASL.
9. Students were given a 15 minute break ninety minutes into WASL testing. During this time they were given a snack and some time to relax and use the bathroom.
10. Once the break was over, students returned to the reading portion of the WASL they had previously been working on.
11. When all students had completed that test section, proctors picked up the test booklets and the booklets were returned to a locked cabinet.

Treatment of the Data

A Spearman rho correlation coefficient was used in conjunction with the Windows STATPAK statistical software program that accompanied the Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application text (Airasian & Gay, 2006). This allowed the researcher to determine a possible correlation between spring, 2008 STAR test scores and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores of

3rd grade ELL students at MES. The following formula was used to test for significance:

$$RHO = 1 - \frac{6 \sum D^2}{N(N^2 - 1)}$$

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a description of the research methodology employed in the study, participants, instruments used, research design, and procedure utilized. Details concerning treatment of the data obtained were also presented.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Data

Introduction

The present research study sought to determine the extent to which a possible correlation existed between spring, 2008 STAR reading scores and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores of 3rd grade ELL students at MES Yakima, Washington.

Description of the Environment

McClure Elementary School, a K – 5 elementary school located in the urban inner city in Yakima in East Central Washington has more than half, 59%, of students enrolled from Hispanic ethnicity and more than three quarters, 79%, from low income families. The present study included nineteen 3rd grade ELL students who completed the STAR Reading and WASL reading tests at MES during the spring of 2008. These ELL students represented a cross-section of varying abilities characteristic of YSD ELL students.

Hypothesis

There would be a significant correlation between students who were successful on the STAR Reading test and WASL reading test.

Null Hypothesis

There would be no significant relationship between students who were successful on the STAR Reading test and WASL reading scores. Significance was determined for $p \geq$ at .05, .01, and .001 levels.

Results of the Study

Table 1 has provided a summary of STAR reading and WASL reading scores for spring, 2008 third grade ELL students at MES. These data indicate results of how 19 participating third grade ELL students scored on the STAR and WASL reading examinations. Scores on the STAR reading exam ranged from a high of 522 and a low of 190. By comparison scores on the WASL reading exam ranged from 426 to 355. Accordingly the top ranked student on the STAR exam was the second ranked student on the WASL reading exam. The student with the lowest ranking score on the STAR reading exam also scored the lowest on the WASL reading exam.

Table 1

Comparison of 3rd Grade spring 2008 STAR Reading Scores and spring 2008 WASL Reading Scores

Student Number	STAR Reading Score	STAR Rank Score	WASL Reading Score	WASL Rank Score
1	214	18	372	17
2	267	16	358	18
3	296	10	387	12

4	269	15	409	5
5	515	2	406	6
6	288	11	372	16
7	277	13	390	11
8	253	17	393	9
9	337	7	413	4
10	277	12	390	10
11	403	3	426	1
12	274	14	381	14
13	522	1	421	2
14	352	6	397	8
15	300	9	403	7
16	328	8	417	3
17	190	19	355	19
18	374	5	372	15
19	402	4	381	13

Figure 1 has displayed data collected from the participants' rank scores for spring, 2008 STAR reading and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores. The Spearman rho correlation on the Windows STATPAK to accompany Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application, Seventh Edition (Airasian & Gay, 2003) was used to calculate data statistics and values. The Spearman rho was 0.61. The N was 19. The Degrees of Freedom were 17.

Figure 1. The Spearman rho analysis showing correlation between WASL and STAR Reading scores

Findings

Significance was determined by the researcher for $p \geq$ at .05 and .01 levels. An analysis of data indicated the null hypothesis was rejected at .05 and .01 levels, but was accepted at .001 levels. In contrast, the hypothesis was supported at .05 and .01 levels, but was not supported at .001 levels. These findings indicated there was a definite correlation between STAR reading and WASL reading scores 99 percent of the time. In general, students who passed the spring, 2008 STAR reading exam also passed the spring, 2008 WASL reading test with a level three or four.

Discussion

The researcher found that a correlation existed between spring, 2008 STAR reading scores and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores. Results of the study provided convincing evidence that a strong correlational relationship between STAR reading scores and WASL reading scores did exist.

Accordingly, as the hypothesis was supported at two of the three levels, a strong correlation between STAR reading scores and WASL reading scores was found. For example, students who ranked high in the group on the STAR reading test also ranked high in the group on the WASL reading test. The null hypothesis was rejected at .05 and .01, but was accepted at .001.

Additionally, the study served to provide a classroom assessment tool for predicting test success needed by MES classroom teachers in order to enhance instruction.

Summary

Chapter 4 included a discussion of the environment, hypothesis, results of the study, findings and discussion. Data analyzed supported the hypothesis that there would be a significant correlation between students who were successful on the STAR Reading test and WASL reading test.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether a correlation existed between ELL student's success on the Renaissance Learning's STAR Reading test, and their success on the reading portion of the WASL.

Conclusions

Based on the review of selected literature and major findings produced from the present study, the following conclusions were reached:

1. English Language Learner students as a group are very diverse individuals and should not be grouped into one category of the success or failure of a school, district, or state education program.
2. The importance of reading as a necessary societal survival skill was evidenced in the enactment of the 2001 NCLB act.
3. Findings produced from major research studies which focused on ELL students and State Tests of Achievement found an insignificant correlation between ELL students as a whole group and statewide achievement tests.

4. Data analyzed supported the hypothesis that there was a positive relationship between spring, 2008 STAR reading scores and spring, 2008 WASL reading scores of 3rd grade MES students at .05 and .01. The hypothesis was not supported at .001.

Recommendations

As a result of the conclusions cited above, the following recommendations have been suggested:

1. Educators should view ELL students as individuals with varying talents and intellects and not base their academic success on the language they do or do not speak.
2. To lend credence to the importance of reading as a necessary societal skill, educators should support to the intent of the NCLB Act.
3. To assist in calculating student performance on high-stakes tests and to allow for intervention prior to students' failing accountability tests, educators should encourage curriculum based measurement, such as the STAR reading test.
4. To determine the existence of possible correlations between STAR reading scores and statewide achievement tests, educators may wish to become familiar with the STAR reading test in context with their respective state high-stakes achievement test.

5. Schools or school districts interested in comparing selected, commercial reading curricula (e.g. STAR Reading test) with state high-stakes reading exams (e.g. WASL Reading test), may wish to utilize information contained in the present study or, they may wish to undertake research more suited to their unique needs.

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