

WRITTEN LANGUAGE AS A WINDOW INTO RESIDUAL LANGUAGE DEFICITS: A STUDY OF CHILDREN WITH PERSISTENT AND RESIDUAL SPEECH AND LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Previous work has suggested that, because writing is a late-acquired and complex skill, it may be a particularly sensitive index of language difficulties in children. Evidence in support of this view was obtained in a study contrasting 161 normally-developing control children aged from 7.5 to 13 years with 75 twin children of the same age who either had specific speech-language impairments, or were co-twins of affected children. Written narratives were elicited from children using a sequence of five photographs depicting a simple story, and were analysed for grammatical complexity and accuracy, intelligibility, and semantic content. Only 42 of the twins could spell well enough to attempt the narrative task. Some co-twins of affected children had deficits in written language, despite normal performance on oral language tests. Most children with language impairments were poor at writing, with particularly marked deficits on a measure of spelling and punctuation. Children with language impairments made a relatively high proportion of phonologically inaccurate spelling errors when compared with younger children at a similar vocabulary level. Those who did poorly on a nonword repetition test were especially likely to have poor written language. However, four children with pure speech difficulties produced age-appropriate written narratives.

Key words: writing, specific language impairment, speech, spelling

INTRODUCTION

Freda Newcombe's interests in the field of neuropsychology were broad, encompassing language, literacy, face processing, visuospatial functions and memory, but her published work was exclusively concerned with acquired disorders in adults. It may therefore be surprising to discover that it was Freda who persuaded the first author to work on developmental language disorders. Her renown as a clinician had led to her having frequent referrals of children with unusual language development, and she realised that few people had looked at their problems from a neuropsychological perspective. When Dorothy Bishop arrived as a new graduate student with an interest in acquired aphasia, Freda suggested that she apply a neurolinguistic approach to a child population. This was excellent advice and developmental language impairment has been Dorothy's principal research topic since that time. In the current paper we discuss a topic that was of great interest to Freda: the relationship between oral and written language impairments.

Our approach to this topic is influenced by the work of Marshall and Newcombe (1973), who demonstrated how analysis of errors can throw light on underlying mechanisms.

The ability to express oneself through writing is a crucially important skill in literate societies, and yet assessment of written language is often overlooked when evaluating children who present with communication problems. This neglect extends to research studies: although there is a substantial body of developmental work on literacy problems, the bulk of it is concerned with reading rather than writing. Those studies that do focus on writing mostly concern spelling of single words, rather than production of narrative text. One reason for lack of both clinical and research interest in children's narrative writing is that it is difficult to measure performance on such an open-ended task. If we ask a child to read or spell a single word, or if we ask questions to check comprehension of a written text, we can simply count how many test items are right or wrong. However, a written narrative can be evaluated on many levels: spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, grammatical complexity, length, amount of information conveyed, and cohesion. Furthermore, personal preferences as well as ability affect what a person writes – for instance, a child may produce a short account in simple sentences because he or she is unmotivated to do more than the minimum, or as a strategic response to grammatical difficulties.

Another possible reason for the relative neglect of writing is that, for most children, reading and writing are highly correlated, at least if one restricts attention to tests of single word reading and spelling (e.g., Bishop, 2001a, reported a Pearson correlation of .865 for 155 children). It might, therefore, seem that assessment of written language is not only time-consuming and difficult, but also rather redundant, insofar as writing ability is readily predictable from reading.

There are, however, some suggestions in the literature that written language can provide valuable information in a clinical context, because writing continuous text is a demanding and sensitive task that will reveal minor problems that might otherwise go undetected. One line of evidence comes from studies of recovery from brain injury in children. Young children who develop aphasia after a lateralised lesion typically have persisting literacy problems even after oral language appears to have recovered (e.g., Alajouanine and Lhermitte, 1965, Watamori et al., 1990). Complementing this line of work are studies of developmental literacy problems. Researchers looking for behavioural markers of residual problems in adult relatives of dyslexic children find that spelling errors provide a sensitive indicator (Wolff et al., 1996).

The goal of this study was to analyse written narratives produced by children with developmental speech and language impairments, to address two related questions. First, does children's writing reveal evidence of literacy problems that might otherwise go undetected? Second, are difficulties with written language in this population correlated with severity of language impairment, or are they more strongly tied to the speech difficulties that often co-occur with language impairments?

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