The Development of Writing in 4-Year-Old Children with and without Language Impairment

Many children with language impairment (LI) experience significant difficulty in developing emergent literacy skills. In studies comparing the emergent literacy skills of children with LI to those of their typically developing peers, children with LI have consistently demonstrated depressed emergent literacy skills in the areas of phonological awareness, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge (Boudreau & Hedberg, 1999; Gillam & Johnston, 1985; Justice, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2006; Kahmi, Lee, & Nelson, 1985; Magnusson & Naucler, 1990; Nathan, Stackhouse, Goulandris, & Snowling, 2004). Very little is known, however, about the emergent writing skills of children with LI. The only research study to date that has examined the emergent writing abilities in children with LI explored how preschool students with LI acquire name writing abilities (Cabell et al., 2009). The results of this study revealed that 4-year-old children with LI were not as proficient in writing their names as their typically developing peers. Specifically, 65.2% of 4-year-old typically developing children were able to write all of the letters in their names, whereas only 47.8% of the children with LI were able to do so. Although this investigation is an important first step in understanding the development of emergent writing skills in preschool students with LI, it is limited in that it only examined name writing abilities. Research has demonstrated that children may use more advanced writing features when the writing task is easier (e.g., name writing) and use less advanced features when the task is more difficult (e.g., describing a picture or writing a story). Therefore, name writing ability may not be the best indicator of children's overall writing abilities (Puranik & Lonigan, 2009).

To more fully characterize the nature of writing development, Puranik and Lonigan (2009) assessed the development of children's writing using several writing tasks; including, writing letters, name, CVC words, a picture description, and a sentence retell. As part of that study, they developed a detailed scoring system that ordered and scored writing features according to how these features may appear developmentally. Results supported the following developmental sequence in the acquisition of writing features: (1) linearity, (2) segmentation, (3) simple characters, (4) left-right orientation, (5) complex characters, (6) random letters, and (7) invented spelling.

This presentation will report the results of a study examining the writing skills of four-year-old children with and without language impairment. Twenty children with language impairment were matched on age and sex to twenty typically developing children. All children completed the Puranik and Lonigan (2009) protocol, a standardized test of language, a hearing screening, and a test of non-verbal intelligence. Preliminary results indicate that children with LI follow the same developmental sequence in their emergent writing skills as their typically developing peers and demonstrate their most advanced writing skills when writing their names.