



Language, literacy, attentional behaviors, and instructional quality predictors of written composition for first graders

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ABSTRACT

We had two primary purposes in the present study: (1) to examine unique child-level predictors of written composition which included language skills, literacy skills (e.g., reading and spelling), and attentiveness and (2) to examine whether instructional quality (quality in responsiveness and individualization, and quality in spelling and writing instruction) is uniquely related to written composition for first-grade children ($N = 527$). Children's written composition was evaluated on substantive quality (ideas, organization, word choice, and sentence flow) and writing conventions (spelling, mechanics, and handwriting). Results revealed that for the substantive quality of writing, children's grammatical knowledge, reading comprehension, letter writing automaticity, and attentiveness were uniquely related. Teachers' responsiveness was also uniquely related to the substantive quality of written composition after accounting for child predictors and other instructional quality variables. For the writing conventions outcome, children's spelling and attentiveness were uniquely related, but instructional quality was not. These results suggest the importance of paying attention to multiple component skills such as language, literacy, and behavioral factors as well as teachers' responsiveness for writing development.

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According to NAEP data, only 35% of students in eighth grade can write proficiently and this proportion has not changed since 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, 2012). The majority of US students write at a basic level or below the basic level, which makes it difficult for them to communicate in writing at school and limits future employment opportunities. Writing connected text, including sentences, paragraphs, and essays (i.e., written composition), is a highly complex task drawing on multiple processes such as oral language skills, transcription skills, and memory (both long-term and working memory; Berninger, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002; Berninger & Swanson, 1994; McCutchen, 2006; Shanahan, 2006). While it is well-known that some of these child-level skills (e.g., spelling) are mediated by instructional influences, the majority of previous studies have focused on either child (Abbott & Berninger, 1993; Berninger & Abbott, 2010; Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, & Whitaker, 1997; Kim, Al Otaiba, et al., 2011; McMaster, Du, & Petursdottir, 2009; Olinghouse, 2008; Wagner et al., 2011) or instructional factors (i.e., particular instructional

approaches; Graham, 2006; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Moats, Foorman, & Taylor, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006) in relation to children's writing achievement. However, as children experience writing instruction mostly in formal schooling (Shanahan, 2006), it is important to examine both child and instructional factors in tandem for children's writing achievement, and to understand these factors early in their academic careers. In fact, the newly released *Common Core Standards* indicate that by the end of first grade, students should be able to write opinion, narrative, and informative/explanatory texts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

In the present study, we examined multilevel predictors – child-level predictors such as language, literacy (e.g., reading and spelling), and attentiveness, and classroom-level predictors such as instructional quality – for written composition for children in grade one. Specifically, we had two primary purposes in the present study. The first purpose was to examine unique child-level component skills of written composition, which included language skills, literacy skills, and attentional difficulties, after accounting for instructional quality. The second purpose was to examine whether instructional quality makes a unique contribution to written composition for first-grade children after accounting for child-level language and literacy skills. Children's written composition was examined in two dimensions, substantive quality and writing conventions.

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Instructional quality was observed and rated based upon a rating scale used in prior studies to examine reading outcomes (Al Otaiba, Folsom, et al., 2011) and description of spelling and writing instruction at kindergarten (Puranik, Al Otaiba, Folsom, & Greulich, 2010).

1. Child-level predictors of written composition

According to a developmental model of writing, multiple cognitive and linguistic factors are necessary for writing development, including lower level transcription skills (spelling and handwriting) and high-level language and cognitive processes (Berninger & Swanson, 1994; also see Berninger et al., 2002). Because children are still developing in their literacy, cognitive, and motor skills, transcription skills are essentially critical for the task of writing. However, children's ability to translate ideas into language at the word, sentence, and discourse level is also hypothesized to be important for developing writers. When children further develop into junior high grades, cognitive skills such as planning and revision are expected to play a more constraining role in written composition.

Transcription skills, including spelling and letter writing fluency, are hypothesized to be important for written composition as they free cognitive resources for higher-level composition processes such as generating ideas and content during writing (Graham, 1990; Graham et al., 1997; Graham & Harris, 2000; McCutchen, 1988, 2006; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Goleman, 1982). It appears that children's spelling ability is important particularly for beginning writers as spelling skills may support or constrain generation of text (Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman, & Raskind, 2008; Ehri, 2000; Graham, Harris, & Chorzempa, 2002; Kim, Al Otaiba, et al., 2011; Puranik & Al Otaiba, 2012; Treiman & Bourassa, 2000). In addition to spelling, letter writing automaticity (typically referred to as handwriting fluency; Berninger, 1999; Graham et al., 1997) – i.e., the accuracy and rate at which children retrieve and produce letters – is also consistently related to children's writing quality and productivity not only for young writers (Graham et al., 1997; Kim, Al Otaiba, et al., 2011; Puranik & Al Otaiba, 2012; Wagner et al., 2011), but also even into adolescence (Graham et al., 1997).

Empirical evidence of the importance of language in beginning writing is accumulating but findings are somewhat inconsistent. On the one hand, Puranik and Al Otaiba (2012) did not find that oral language skills were related to the number of words or ideas produced by kindergarteners (i.e., writing productivity) once spelling and handwriting were entered into a regression model. However, using structural equation modeling with latent variables, Kim, Al Otaiba, et al. (2011) showed that children's oral language skill, captured by vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, was uniquely related to writing productivity (how much children wrote) for children at the end of kindergarten. Similarly, third-grade students' grammatical understanding was uniquely related to writing quality (ideation, organization, grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary choice), after accounting for word reading, IQ, writing productivity, and spelling (Olinghouse, 2008). In addition, oral language skill composed of verbal reasoning, phonological awareness, and sentence memory was uniquely related to writing productivity (total number of words written) among second- and third-grade students and to writing quality among first- and sixth-grade students, after accounting for reading (Abbott & Berninger, 1993).

In addition to transcription and language skills, converging findings from previous studies suggest that reading skill, reading comprehension in particular, might be a unique correlate of writing skill for children in grades one and above (Abbott & Berninger, 1993; Berninger & Abbott, 2010; Berninger et al., 2002; Olinghouse, 2008). Neither word reading skills nor children's reading skill composed of word reading and reading comprehension were uniquely related to

children's writing productivity at the end of kindergarten (Kim, Al Otaiba, et al., 2011). Yet Berninger and Abbott (2010) showed that children's reading comprehension was uniquely related to writing quality after accounting for receptive and expressive oral language skills for children in beginning (grade one) and more advanced stages of writing development (grade seven). It has also been suggested that reading and writing may have a bidirectional relation, developing in tandem (Shanahan, 2006; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986, 1988).

Another potential factor that might influence children's writing skill is student behaviors such as inattention and hyperactivity. Although correlated, inattention and hyperactivity are distinct constructs (e.g., Barkley, 1990; Goodyear & Hynd, 1992; Lahey & Carlson, 1991). Inattention has been hypothesized to reflect problems in self-regulation of internal cognitive processes while hyperactivity may reflect problems in self-regulation of behavior (Barkley, 1996). Classrooms are complex learning environments where teacher and child characteristics interact and influence children's learning (Connor, Morrison, et al., 2009; Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009; Saez, Folsom, Al Otaiba, & Schatschneider, 2012; Verhoeven, Schnotz, & Paas, 2009). Furthermore, literacy acquisition (i.e., reading and writing) is a complex task with multiple cognitive demands competing for children's attention. Thus, the extent of children's attentiveness or lack thereof is likely to influence their literacy acquisition (Posner & McCandliss, 1999). Studies have shown the influence of attentional difficulties on one's prereading skills (Willcutt et al., 2007), reading, and overall academic achievement after accounting for intelligence in longitudinal studies following students from kindergarten to second grade (Dally, 2006) and from adolescence to adulthood (Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1997).

Given that attention contributes to reading outcomes of young children, it is reasonable to hypothesize that attentional difficulties are also likely to contribute to their writing skills because writing requires the juggling of multiple processes, perhaps to an even greater extent than in reading (Moats, 2005). Indeed, a recent study showed that children's inattentiveness, but not hyperactivity, was related to their writing skills (measured by Woodcock Johnson-Revised Writing Samples and Writing Fluency tasks) indirectly via an orthographic factor (e.g., orthographic choice task and letter cluster coding task) and a rapid naming factor for children with dyslexia (Thomson et al., 2005). In other words, children's inattentiveness was directly related to orthographic and rapid naming factors which were, in turn, directly related to written composition measured by the Woodcock Johnson-Revised Writing Samples and Writing Fluency tasks. However, our understanding of the relation of attentional difficulties to writing skill is still very limited. For instance, it is not clear whether attentiveness is uniquely related to writing after accounting for other important language and literacy skills. One hypothesis is that the influence of attentiveness on written composition is via other lexical- and text-level literacy skills such as reading comprehension and spelling, such that attentiveness is not uniquely related to written composition over and above reading comprehension and spelling. This is a reasonable hypothesis given that orthographic awareness and rapid naming are sublexical skills that contribute to lexical- and text-level literacy skills (Compton, 2003; de Jong & van der Leij, 1999; Savage, Pillay, & Melidona, 2008; Thomson et al., 2005; Wolf & Bowers, 1999; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001), and thus, once spelling and reading comprehension are taken into consideration in the statistical model, attentiveness might not be uniquely related to writing. An alternative hypothesis is that attentiveness relates to children's written composition beyond language and literacy skills because writing demands coordination of multiple processes such that controlled attention is needed for written composition over and above language and literacy skills.

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