

Clendon, S.A., & Erickson, K.A., (2008). The vocabulary of beginning writers: Implications for children with complex communication needs. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 24*, 281-293.

Keywords: writing, elementary education, vocabulary instruction, complex communication needs, cross-national vocabulary study.

Summary: In this cross-country study, 2,721 writing samples by 125 students from the United States and 113 students from New Zealand were analyzed to ascertain the vocabularies employed by typical developing early elementary children. Findings about the most commonly occurring words appearing in the writing samples may be used in informing practices for students with complex communication needs (CCN). Specifically, writing samples were compared across school ages and the two countries to assist augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) professionals with selecting, prioritizing, and organizing vocabulary to help written language development in children with CCN.

Assumptions:

- Few studies have examined vocabulary of typically developing children.
- Typically developing children face similar struggles with writing as students with CCN.
- CCN and typically developing children both struggle with taking language from their heads and effectively using an instrument (pencil or communication device) to transform ideas into expression.
- The cognitive, memory, and physical demands of expressing mental language influences the quantity and quality of language produced with a pencil or communication device.
- By studying vocabulary in writing samples from typically developing children, researchers may decrease the demands on children with CCN.
- There are four main cognitive processes in composing text: planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring.

Results:

- There are in fact, “school age and country related differences in the vocabulary words used when beginning writers compose about self-selected topics” (p.292).
- A small core vocabulary represents a large portion of language samples.
- Comparing New Zealand and the United States, there were differences in high frequency words.
- The findings show some multiword sequences occur with enough regularity that they “warrant their whole units in AAC systems” (p.289).
- The usage patterns for multiword sequences were different between New Zealand and the U.S.

Conclusions:

- Since the number of core vocabulary words is small, CCN students can be taught these words at the beginning of their instruction, which will allow students to focus on spelling and acquiring less familiar words.
- Younger students had a more restricted vocabulary than their older counterparts.
- Multiword sequences, which occur with high frequency, should be taught as whole units.
- Many high frequency words and multiword sequences were country-specific.

#### Suggestions for Teachers:

- New Zealand AAC professionals should construct their own AAC systems to accommodate their own frequent word vocabulary list. Currently, New Zealand uses programs made in other countries, and is therefore, not equipped with vocabulary that is of high frequency in New Zealand.
- CCN students should be taught core vocabulary words early so they may focus on other, more advanced, vocabulary skills.
- The students' age should be considered as it relates to cognitive, memory, and physical demands in learning a new expressive form.
- High frequency multiword sequences can be taught as whole units.

#### Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- The localized context of a vocabulary should be considered when developing an AAC system.
- Different methods can be used to garner other high frequency multiword sequences.
- Comparing high frequency word use across different genres and topics may provide greater insight into other high frequency words.