Using morphology with phonological difficulties: Evidence from children with otitis media and poor readers.

While it is well established that both phonological and morphological awareness are closely linked to literacy development, it is not clear which specific skills are key for literacy attainment. The phonological system can be impaired due to difficulties with hearing or cognitive structures. We compared the effects of phonological impairments caused by repeated ear infections (otitis media) to those associated with dyslexia. We examined the impact through a series of static and dynamic oral awareness measures, as well as during spelling and reading. Findings revealed that children with a history of otitis media had specific difficulties with phonological awareness and made fewer phonologically plausible misspellings. Children with a history of otitis media were diverse in their literacy outcomes. One third had a significant literacy delay but others were reading well in advance of their years. Children with otitis media did not have difficulties with morphology. Poor readers had more generalised difficulties with both phonological and morphological skills. Poor readers showed greater weaknesses in oral measures of phonological and morphological awareness, as well as in the use of these skills during spelling and reading. Understanding whether phonological impairments necessarily impair literacy is crucial for remedial advice for children with speech, hearing and reading difficulties. If alternate skills (such as morphology) can develop despite a phonological difficulty, the question then is whether those skills can be protective or compensatory in support of reading acquisition.