Children with specific language impairment (SLI) are known to have deficits in tense-marking grammatical morphology (Leonard, 1998). The omission of regular past tense markers in children with SLI occurs with greater frequency and for a longer period relative to age- and language-matched peers (Rice, Wesler, & Hershberger, 1998). Production of bare verb stems (e.g., played) in contexts where inflected forms (e.g., played) are obligatory in the adult language can persist well into the early school age years for children with SLI (Rice, Wesler, & Hershberger, 1998). Such productions are best characterized as variably occurring. Indeed, several studies examining the spontaneous language of children with SLI have documented inconsistent past tense marking on the same verb within a language sample (Bishop, 1994; Leonardi et al., 1997).

One explanation of variable past tense performance relates to the linguistic complexity of the utterance containing the target verb. The potential trade-off between past tense proficiency and syntactic complexity has been explored using elicitation tasks. Owen (2010) reported that children with SLI between the ages of five and eight, like their typical peers, were sensitive to syntactic planning demands when producing past tense morphology. These children omitted past tense more often when producing finite complex clauses and temporal adverbial clauses as compared to their production of coordinated clauses. This finding was explained via a processing capacities model. It was speculated that the increased syntactic planning demands associated with production of complex sentences, when compared to those associated with the production of compound sentences, rendered past tense marking more vulnerable to omissions. For example, the complement clause in John remembered where Sue played displays similar hierarchical dependency. Conversely, the two coordinate clauses in John painted and Sue played can more readily be planned independent of one another.

Inquiries into the trade-off between syntactic complexity and past tense marking among children with SLI have been limited to studies that have used elicitation procedures. The rationale of the present study was to explore the generalization of these findings to the spontaneous language of children with SLI. Additionally, whereas prior work compared past tense marking across complex syntax types, this study collapsed types in order to compare the specific influence of independent clause versus dependent clause syntactic structure on regular past tense marking accuracy.