

## Spoken Language vs. Written Language

Research and practice of language teaching has identified four major language skills of “paramount importance,” namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (Brown, 2001: 232). Listening and reading are the receptive skills (taking in information); speaking and writing are the productive skills (giving out information). Excluding other forms of communication such as nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) and graphics (drawings, paintings, etc.), “[t]he human race has fashioned two forms of productive performance, oral and written, and two forms of receptive performance, aural (or auditory) and reading” (*ibid.* 232).

Current trends in foreign language teaching call for an integration of the four skills and an adoption of a whole language curriculum mainly because despite the apparent differences, language skills are interrelated and enhance each other. In other words, the development of a single language skill contributes to the development of others. For instance, listening to people talking improves one’s ability to speak, reading makes better writers and writing helps in developing phonic knowledge and enhances reading fluency.

Both writing and speaking are clearly productive activities in that they create language outcomes just as listening and reading are both passive activities for information intake. In communication, speaking and writing are complementary and “the person who commands both the forms of writing and of speech is therefore constructed in a fundamentally different way from the person who commands the form of speech alone” (Kress, 1989; in Tribble, 1996: 12). On the other hand, the physical acts of speaking and writing are very different. In fact, for Crystal (1995), the difference between writing and speaking is merely physical as “[s]peech uses the transmitting medium of ‘phonic substance’, typically air-pressure movements produced by the vocal organs, whereas writing uses the transmitting medium of ‘graphic substance’, typically marks on a surface made by a hand using an implement” (p. 5).

Furthermore, speaking and writing take place in distinct communicative situations and have different language structures. Yet, beyond this physical difference, maintains Crystal (1995), lies more similarity and interrelationship.

In spite of the fact that the two mediums function as independent ways for achieving communicative intentions, in some occasions, the two language forms become very similar; and in others, they can be used interchangeably or what is called a “mixed medium” (*ibid.*). Concerning interaction, for instance, speech is normally interactive and writing is not. Yet, when talking to a telephone answering machine, it is a monologue that shares a lot of writing features such as permanence, absence of face-to-face interaction, distance and processing time. Conversely, emails and fax machines allow questions and answers to fly in the world in a similar way that two participants are talking to each other.

Harmer (2004) makes the difference between writing and speaking in terms of time and space of communication, participants, process, organization, language, signs, symbols and product. However, similar to Crystal (1995), Harmer (2004) stresses that in some contexts, these differences between writing and speaking fade away. For example, the use of written language in text messaging and internet chatting seems to be more like speech than written discourse where speakers seem to be speaking while using written words. As another example is the degree to which a formal speech follows the rules of writing in terms of structure, organization, and language use. Such types of speech seem to be more writing than speaking. What comes next is a summary of some differences between the two productive skills as seen by Brown (2001):

- **Permanence:** spoken language is fleeting, once a sentence is uttered, it vanishes. The hearer is, therefore, required to make immediate perceptions and storage. Written language is permanent; the reader has the opportunity to return again and again, if necessary, to any length piece of written language.

- **Processing/Production time:** related to permanence is the time that readers gain in processing a piece of writing. Most reading contexts allow people to read at their own rate as they are not forced into following the rate of delivery as in spoken language. Furthermore, writers have more time to plan, review and edit their writing; whereas speakers must plan, formulate and deliver their utterances within few moments.
- **Distance:** in face-to-face conversations, both the speaker and the listener share the same physical and temporal context which makes it easy to understand what *now* and *that* stand for in an expression like: “Now, what exactly did you mean by that?” Writing, on the other hand, requires the reader to interpret language that was written in some other place at some other time with only the written words themselves as contextual clues.
- **Orthography:** for spoken language, there are many verbal and nonverbal cues to enhance the message such as stress, rhythm, juncture, intonation, pauses and volume. For writing, the best available thing is punctuation and in some contexts pictures or charts. This fact requires readers to do their best to infer, interpret and read between the lines so they can uncover the ambiguity that is present in a good deal of writing.
- **Complexity:** written language relies on relatively long clauses connected by subordination<sup>1</sup>. Spoken language is characterized by shorter clauses, more coordination and more redundancy (repetition, for instance).
- **Vocabulary:** written language uses a wider variety of lexical items than spoken language where the vocabulary is limited. This is mainly because writing allows more

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<sup>1</sup> Not all languages tend to favor subordination in writing as English does. Arabic, for example, relies more on coordination rather than subordination.

production time, necessitates stricter conventions as well as writers' desire to be precise.

- **Formality:** Writing tends to be more formal than speech. For instance, in essay writing, writers must conform to some conventions like: paragraph topics, logical order, way of developing ideas, and a preference for non-redundancy and subordination of clauses, etc. Furthermore, some writings (sacred writing, historical documents, first editions, etc.) are given a kind of respect which is rarely accorded to speech (Brown, 2001: 303-06).

Another comprehensible classification of differences between writing and speaking is the one provided by Emig (1977) into eleven points:

1. Writing is learned behavior; talking is natural, even irrepressible, behavior.
2. Writing then is an artificial process; talking is not.
3. Writing is a technological device – not the wheel, but early enough to qualify a primary technology; talking is organic, natural, earlier.
4. Most writing is slower than most talking.
5. Writing is stark, barren, even naked as a medium; talking is rich, luxuriant, inherently redundant.
6. Talk leans on the environment; writing must provide its own context.
7. With writing, the audience is usually absent; with talking, the listener is usually present.
8. Writing usually results in a visible graphic product; talking usually does not.
9. Perhaps because there is a product involved, writing tends to be more responsible and committed act than talking.

10. It can even be said that throughout history, an aura, an ambience, a mystique has usually encircled the written word; the spoken word has for most proved ephemeral and treated mundanely.

11. Because writing is often our representation of the world made visible, embodying both process and product, writing is more readily a form and source of learning than talking (Emig, 1977: 123-24).

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