

The Relationship between Speaking and Writing in Descriptive Discourse in a Moroccan University EFL Context

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Abstract

The present paper aims at investigating the relationship between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse among Moroccan university EFL students within the department of English Studies at Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco. To attain this end, 80 undergraduate semester six students studying English as a foreign language were randomly selected to participate in the current study. Subsequently, speaking and writing proficiency tests were administered to the participants to measure their descriptive abilities in speaking and writing. The data were analyzed by carrying out correlation and regression analysis in SPSS. The results reveal that there is a strong positive and statistically significant correlation between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse, $r = .61$. Descriptive speaking can predict 37 percent of EFL students' descriptive writing ($R^2 = .37$). The study ends with implications for teachers, syllabus designers, and the department of English studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning any target language revolves around receptive and productive language skills. If receptive skills provide learners with spoken/oral and written “input” to be internalized and processed, productive skills allow learners to produce spoken/oral and written “output” and show a certain degree of mastering the new language. As a response to this artificial division, Krashen (1981) already asserted that it is impossible for teachers to focus on one skill and ignore the others; this separation between language skills seems to be superficial because these skills cannot be separated. Additionally, Oxford (2001) advocated an integrated approach to language teaching through which skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing could be taught conjointly.

Oxford's appeal to the integration of language skills in teaching practices cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, most available research has tended to view the impact of separate language skills on the overall learning process and ignore the interconnections between these skills (Hubert, 2008; Larouz, 2012). Before these alarms, Hartley (2007), as an outside expert and observer of applied linguistics research, noticed that the four language skills have been dealt with separately by most of researchers. In addition to this, no prior studies have examined the relationship between speaking and writing in the Moroccan context. Against this background, the current paper is meant to investigate the kind of relationship that may exist between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse among Moroccan university EFL semester six students within the department of English studies at Moulay Ismail University.

Research Question

The current study is guided by the following research question:

1. Is there a significant relationship between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse among semester six students from the department of English studies at Moulay Ismail University?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the recent history of English language teaching, a shift from “input hypothesis” and its role in language acquisition to “output and interactionist hypotheses” that emphasize the importance of production in processing the target language has been witnessed in ELT research. Krashen (1994), as one of the most popular and well-known advocates of “input Hypothesis”, asserted that comprehensible input is all that is needed to learn the target language. Nevertheless, Lee and VanPatten (1995) stated that “input hypothesis” alone might not be sufficient to foster a native-like acquisition in L2. Proponents of this view (e.g., Swain, 1985; Pica, 1994; Long, 1996) claimed that both “input” and “output” are equally important for language acquisition. Thus, the “output hypothesis” was developed as a response to Krashen’s “input hypothesis”.

In this case, the role of output or language production cannot be overshadowed; and productive language skills have been assumed to play a central role in language development (e.g., Swain, 1995; Izumi, 2002; Mackey, 2002; Yassin, Razak, & Maasum, 2019). To highlight the importance of speaking, Ur (2000) stated that “of all the four skills, speaking seems intuitively to be the most important; people who know a language are referred to as ‘speakers’ of the language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing” (p. 12). Furthermore, speaking is thought to play a great role in interlanguage development to generate better input, force syntactic processing, take risks, develop automaticity, and develop discourse skills (Skehan, 1998). To focus on the significance of writing, Imsa-ard (2020) claims that writing is a very important skill that takes part in everyday life such as taking notes and writing emails. Additionally, Kellogg (2001) asserted that writing is a cognitive process that tests memory and thinking ability. Besides, Harmer (2004) states that writing encourages students to focus on accurate language use and, because they think as they write, it may well provoke language development as they resolve problems which writing puts into their minds. Writing, like speaking, is also thought to help students reinforce the grammatical structures, enhance vocabulary, and assist other skills such as reading, listening, and speaking (Kellogg, 2008).

In spite of the great role of productive language skills in language development, as exemplified by the above previous research, many foreign language teachers have not considered the differences in their students’ proficiency in speaking and writing (Weissberg, 2006). Therefore, understanding the relationship between speaking and writing has not received much attention from EFL and ESL teachers and researchers.

To determine the kind of interconnections between speaking and writing, most of previous research has shown at least that speaking and writing are interrelated in a way or another. For instance, Silva (1990) remarks that writing generally follows a standardized form of grammar, structure, and vocabulary which is inseparable from the structure of the spoken sentences. In addition, spoken and written languages are thought to use the same underlying mechanisms to construct syntactic structures (Cleland & Pickering, 2006). Syntax, according to these two scholars, is accessed in the same way in spoken and written production; and the syntactic representations underlying sentence production are shared between spoken and written language. Syntactic complexity, as a result, can be used as a reliable measurement to investigate the relationship between English speaking and writing; and students who can produce complex syntactic structures in speaking are likely to produce similar patterns in writing and vice versa (Zhu, 2008). Along the same vein, Cheung and Leung (2011) correlated between sub-constructs like ‘ideas & organization’ and ‘vocabulary

& language patterns' across speaking and writing and deduced that these attributes can be transferred from speaking to writing and vice versa.

Some other investigations on the same issue tended to examine the degree of association between the two productive modalities and concluded that there is a positive correlation between speaking and writing. For instance, it was proven that the development of one of these modalities is associated with the development of the other (e.g., Hubert, 2008, 2011; Cheung & Chang, 2009; Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2016).

These correlational studies, however, examined speaking and writing connection by measuring them in a more general way. The current paper has specifically sought to measure these abilities in descriptive discourse. That is, the descriptive mode of discourse is kept constant and the modalities of speaking and writing are varied. Bearing this in mind, correlating speaking and writing in descriptive discourse might generate new compelling findings.

To attain this end, it is also required to mention some of the traits of descriptive discourse. In the first place, descriptive discourse can be defined as an analysis of a concrete referent (Greimas & Courtes, 1979 as cited in Merlo & Mansur, 2004). Describing people, places, objects, or events in written or spoken modes are instances. When writers and speakers describe a referent, they usually mention its unity, parts, attributes, spatial location and make comparisons or metaphors (Merlo & Mansur, 2004). Descriptive discourse, therefore, is a genre that deals with the students' perceptions (Kane, 2000).

In the same vein, Glencoe (2005) states that, "to compose an effective description, the writer creates vivid word pictures and organizes these pictures into effective patterns" (p. 127). To further empower a description, he adds that "the writer makes use of energetic verbs, attempts to choose exact verbs in order to mirror strong mental images, chooses a particular vantage point (a place that provides a good view) either stationary or moving" (p. 140). Similarly, Rozmiarck (2000) claims that descriptive writing has the following aspects: "a focused topic, an engaging lead, adequate supporting details, transitions, varied sentence structure and length, several elements of stylistic language (similes, metaphors), and a powerful conclusion" (p.9). In language classrooms, learners' descriptions can range from writing single sentences to writing descriptive paragraphs or essays; they can be provided with situations to use language, either spoken or written, to describe people, places, objects, or events.

In this context of extensive use of language, using language for descriptive purposes is thought to be vital for so many reasons. If learners, for instance, are asked to describe referents relying on pictures brought by the teacher to the classroom, this can help them elicit a great deal of vocabulary such as adjectives of describing people. Second, it is a process that helps learners improve the strength of observation to depict things as they are in the real world, which can in turn activate the learners' senses and perceptions. Third, to describe a concrete referent guarantees that learners are already familiar with what they are describing.

Due to the communicative benefits of providing learners with opportunities to use language, either spoken or written, for descriptive purposes as well as the fact that other previous studies correlated between speaking and writing in a general way without maintaining a certain mode of discourse, the current paper will examine the relationship between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse among Moroccan university EFL students enrolled at semester six. That is, the students' scores of descriptive speaking will be correlated with their descriptive writing ones to testify whether there is any relationship between the two modalities in descriptive discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design of the Study

The present study adheres to a quantitative correlational research design to correlate the students' scores in descriptive speaking and descriptive writing. This design enables the

researcher to determine the degree of association between two or more variables. Additionally, it can allow researchers to predict the scores of one of the variables based on the scores of another variable by running simple linear regression. To set up the correlational design for the present study, the variables were measured. Afterwards, the correlation coefficient r and simple linear regression were computed in SPSS to determine the strength and direction of the relationship that may exist between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse.

3.2 Sample

The sample was drawn out randomly from a population of 759 EFL undergraduate university semester six students. For the sake of illustration, 19 participants were selected randomly from group one (made up of 161 students), 18 participants from group two (made up of 165 students), 19 participants from group three (made up of 214 students), and 24 participants from group four (made up of 219 students). To select a truly randomized sample for the current study and to avoid selecting participants from one single group, the participants were taken from the four different groups. The classification of the participants based on group is displayed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Group Distribution in the Sample

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1	19	23.8
	2	18	22.5
	3	19	23.8
	4	24	30.0
	Total	80	100.0

3.3 Instruments

The present study relied on oral and writing proficiency tests to collect data. The tests were designed by the researcher with the aim of selecting appropriate items to measure the students' descriptive abilities in the two modalities. The speaking proficiency test contains two items (items 1 & 2) in which students describe two pictures. The descriptive ability in speaking was rated holistically on a rating scale that ranges from 0 to 10 marks. The writing proficiency test is composed of four items in which the subjects were required to describe two pictures (items 1 & 2), complete a set of sentences using the correct adjective (item 3), and write a descriptive paragraph (item 4). Likewise, the descriptive ability in writing was rated holistically on a scale of 0-10 marks.

3.4 Procedure

The spoken data were collected before the written ones. In the first stage, the participants were interviewed individually for approximately ten minutes to measure their speaking abilities in descriptive discourse. Subsequently, the same participants were handed the writing proficiency test to measure their writing abilities in descriptive discourse. In measuring writing abilities, the participants had an allotted time of forty-five minutes to finish the test.

4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The results of descriptive statistics revealed that a total number of 80 participants took part in this study. Table 2 below gives information about the means, the standard deviations, the minimum and the maximum:

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Descriptive Speaking and Descriptive Writing

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Descriptive Speaking Ability	80	3.25	8.25	5.62	1.24
Descriptive Writing Ability	80	1.75	8.50	5.09	1.51
Valid N (listwise)	80				

The results displayed above showed a mean of 5.62 for descriptive speaking and a mean of 5.09 for descriptive writing which suggests that the scores of descriptive speaking are greater than the ones of descriptive writing. Furthermore, the standard deviation values revealed that there is more variance in descriptive writing abilities scores since 1.24 is smaller than 1.51. In other words, descriptive speaking scores are closer than descriptive writing scores to the mean; and descriptive writing scores are more dispersed and slightly farther from the mean.

After displaying the results of descriptive statistics, the next section will present the results of correlation between descriptive speaking abilities (DSA) and descriptive writing abilities (DWA).

4.2 Correlation Results

To visualize the type of relationship that exists between descriptive speaking and writing, a scatterplot is displayed (see Figure 1 below).

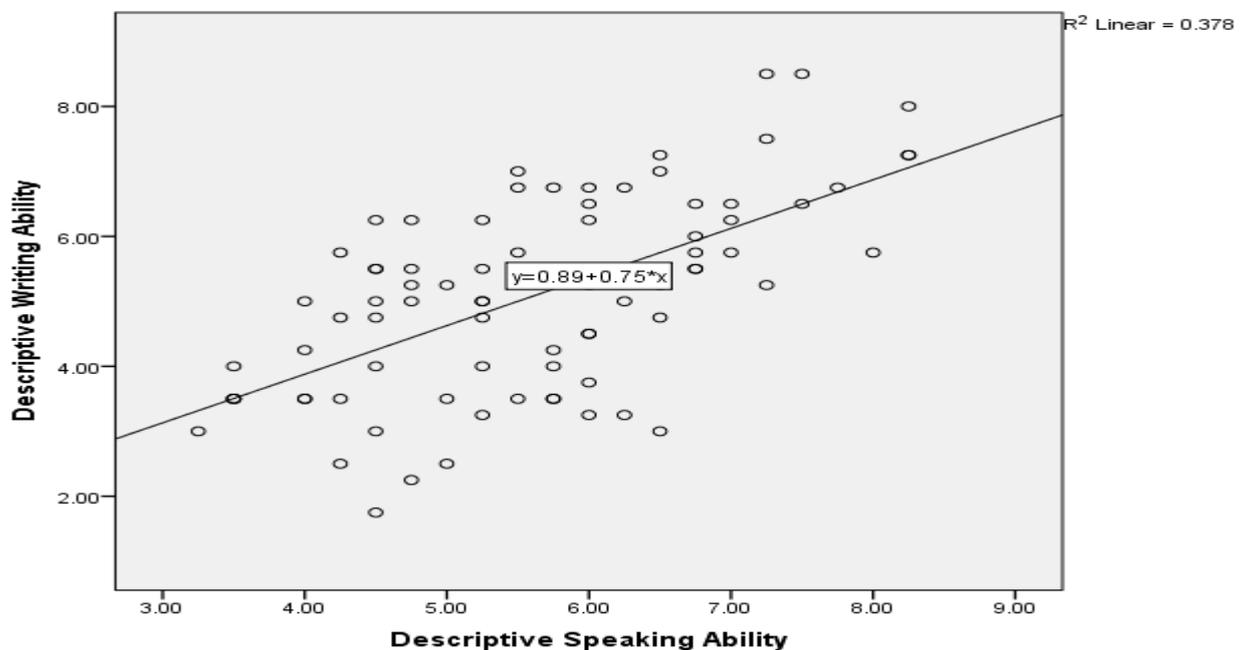


Figure 1. Scatter plot of descriptive speaking and descriptive writing

As demonstrated in Figure 1, a straight line went through the bulk of the dots that looked randomly scattered around the line; hence, this inspection suggested a linear relationship between DSA and DWA. Besides, the spread of the data is similar along the line; the distance between the points from the line is fairly similar as we move from the left to the

right despite some variation. The dots are not cone-shaped or curved, and the points cluster in a band running from lower left to upper right; therefore, there is a positive correlation. Additionally, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the degree of this positive association (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. Correlation between Descriptive Speaking and Descriptive Writing

		Descriptive Speaking Ability	Descriptive Writing Ability
Descriptive Speaking Ability	Pearson Correlation	1	.61**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	80	80
Descriptive Writing Ability	Pearson Correlation	.61**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	80	80

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlational results displayed in Table 3 above showed that there is a strong positive statistically significant correlation at the level of .01 between DSA and DWA. The Pearson's correlation coefficient is determined ($r = .61$), and ($p < .001$). In other words, these abilities are strongly related to each other. When descriptive speaking abilities increase, descriptive writing abilities increase too and vice versa.

To determine whether descriptive speaking abilities could predict descriptive writing abilities, a simple linear regression was carried out.

4.3 Simple Linear Regression

A simple linear regression was run to examine how well descriptive speaking ability could predict the level of descriptive writing ability. These results are displayed in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Model Summary b (DSA and DWA)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.61 ^a	.37	.37	1.20	1.48

Note. A. Predictors: (Constant), Descriptive Speaking Ability.
b. Dependent Variable: Descriptive Writing Ability.

Based on these results, it is apparent that descriptive speaking can predict 37 percent of EFL learners' descriptive writing ($R = .61$, $R^2 = .37$). The statistical significance of the above regression model is displayed in Table 5 below:

Table 5. ANOVA a (DSA and DWA)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	68.68	1	68.68	47.30	.000 ^b
	Residual	113.25	78	1.45		
	Total	181.93	79			

Note. A. Dependent Variable: Descriptive Writing Ability.
b. Predictors: (Constant), Descriptive Speaking Ability.

The results $F(1, 78) = 47.30$, $p < .001$ indicated that descriptive speaking predicted descriptive writing in a significant way. That is, descriptive speaking can be considered as a significant predictor of descriptive writing. In addition, the regression equation that can be

used to predict descriptive writing based on the scores of descriptive speaking is displayed in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Coefficients a (DSA and DWA)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		95.0% Confidence Interval for B		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.88	.62		1.41	.161	-.36	2.13
	Descriptive Speaking Ability	.74	.10	.61	6.87	.000	.53	.96

Note. A. Dependent Variable: Descriptive Writing Ability

As displayed in Table 6 above, the regression equation that can be relied on to predict descriptive writing from descriptive speaking is $Y = 0.89 + 0.75x$. Moreover, the beta value of .61 indicated that one full standard deviation's change in descriptive speaking resulted in .61 standard deviation change in descriptive writing. The results of the t-test ($t = 6.87$, $p < .001$) showed that the beta value enjoyed statistical significance. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval* for the slope to predict descriptive writing ability from descriptive speaking ability ranged from .53 to .96; thus, for each one unit increase of descriptive speaking ability, descriptive writing ability increases by about .53 to .96 points.

In brief, the results of the present study showed that the students' descriptive speaking scores are greater than their descriptive writing ones. Nevertheless, the correlational results demonstrated that the relationship between descriptive speaking ability and descriptive writing ability is linear; and there is a statistically significant positive correlation between them, $r = .61$, $p < .001$. In addition to these results, the regression analysis showed that DSA predicted DWA in a statistically significant way. The R^2 for this equation was .37; that is, 37 % of the variance in descriptive writing ability was predictable from the level of descriptive speaking. In light of these findings, the next section will discuss the results of the present study.

5. DISCUSSION

The above results revealed a difference in the means of descriptive speaking and descriptive writing scores as well as a significant positive correlation between the two datasets. On the one hand, the results showed that writing abilities are below speaking ones. This could suggest that students encounter more difficulties in writing than they do in speaking, and this could be attributed to deficiencies in mastering some writing subskills. Writing, being more difficult than speaking, could be also due to the methodologies used by teachers to teach writing or lack of writing practice among semester six students.

On the other hand, the results showed that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between descriptive speaking abilities (DSA) and descriptive writing abilities (DWA). Increases in descriptive speaking scores correlate positively with increases in descriptive writing ones, and descriptive speaking is a significant predictor of descriptive writing. Based on these results, we conclude that there is a linear strong positive relationship between speaking and writing in descriptive discourse among semester six students. Such a kind of connection might be due to the transfer of a set of shared sub-skills across speaking and writing modalities or could be generated by descriptive discourse knowledge cutting across the two modalities.

With regards to the transfer across speaking and writing, sub-skills of both may cut through these two modalities. In this case, having a good skillfulness of speaking is likely to be strongly associated with having a good ability in writing. These results are in consonance

with Silva (1990) who remarks that writing generally follows a standardized form of grammar, structure, and vocabulary which cannot be separated from the structure of the spoken sentences. Zhu (2008) also proved that students who can produce complex syntactic structures in speaking are likely to produce the same patterns in writing and vice versa. In addition to these explanations, the positive correlation between speaking and writing can be attributed to some descriptive discourse traits (descriptive discourse knowledge) that may traverse speaking and writing modalities.

In this case, being skillful in using adjectives, similes, metaphors, and the strength of observation are inevitable attributes of descriptive mode that can be used in both modalities. The ability to depict things as they are in the real world and describe them, therefore, may pass over speaking and writing modalities; and learners who master these specific-genre aspects can use them in both modalities. Descriptive discourse is a genre that mainly deals with perceptions (Kane, 2000) in which learners are provided with situations/referents to use spoken and written language for the sake of describing people, places, objects, or events. Hence, being able to describe these referents in speaking can be associated with doing the same in writing, and these descriptive discourse traits may pass through speaking and writing.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of the current study support the assumption, put forward by previous researchers, that speaking and writing can develop symmetrically (e.g., Hubert, 2008, 2011; Cheung & Chang, 2009; Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2016). Nevertheless, these studies measured speaking and writing in a general way and without considering the use of language for specific communicative purposes. Specifically, it is proven in the current study that increases in descriptive speaking correlate with increases in descriptive writing due to the transfer of speaking and writing sub-skills as well as descriptive discourse knowledge across the two modalities. Because descriptive discourse knowledge can traverse speaking and writing and contribute to their enhancement among semester six students, making a balance between descriptive speaking and descriptive writing is likely to positively feedback teaching practices and enhance the quality of instruction provided to EFL students.

Based on the findings of this study, some pedagogical implications can be drawn for teachers of speaking and writing, for syllabus designers, and for the department of English studies. Initially, teachers of both modalities are encouraged to know how to turn a speaking task into a writing one and vice versa. For instance, descriptive speaking tasks can be relied on to enhance the quality of written products among these students. Since semester six students' abilities in descriptive writing are limited and below their descriptive speaking ones, descriptive speaking can be used as a good start to sustain these students and activate their background knowledge about the topics assigned in descriptive writing. In this case, students who are good at speaking can use their oral abilities to support their performance in writing. Equally important, descriptive writing can be viewed as an excellent point of departure in descriptive speaking tasks. Giving students enough time to think about what to say by making use of writing is likely to motivate them to speak.

In the same vein, syllabus designers are to establish connections and bridges between the spoken and written language in the content of speaking and writing subjects. This, in turn, should be exhibited in the objectives of courses to raise the awareness of teachers about the issue. The reason why these interrelationships are important is that they can allow learners with good abilities in one modality to support their abilities in the other. Another possible way to integrate the two productive modalities is to complement the tasks assigned in one modality with the tasks of the other modality.

Similarly, the department of English Studies should ensure a balance between descriptive speaking and writing. In other words, the department can adopt a teaching and learning analogy in which speaking subjects are to be taught along with writing ones by maintaining the same mode of discourse at the same study level. In this case, descriptive

speaking can be accompanied with descriptive writing. For instance, the content that students are exposed to in descriptive speaking could be reproduced in descriptive writing and vice versa. This, in turn, can help students transfer modality aspects (subskills of both speaking and writing) as well as mode knowledge (descriptive discourse knowledge) across the two modalities.

Finally, while the findings are interesting here, future researchers should be encouraged to investigate the relationship between speaking and writing in other types of discourse such as narrative, expository, and argumentative modes. Further empirical inquiries are also needed to investigate other specific traits such as vocabulary, cohesive devices, grammar, and syntactic complexity across speaking and writing.

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