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The Relationship between the Sub-components of English Writing and Speaking Skills among Hong Kong Primary Students

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Abstract

The Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) proposed by the Hong Kong Education Commission is held annually for Primary 3 (P.3), Primary 6 (P.6) and Secondary 3 (S.3) students. The TSA consists of four papers on the English Language, listening, reading, writing and speaking. This study focused on the productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking in primary English. 'Content' and 'language' are the common sub-components shared by both skills at P.6. Since the speaking paper was assessed on a sampling basis (normally 24 students per school), a total of over 11,000 P.3 and 12,000 P.6 student oral and writing performances were analysed in this study. This was an adequate sample since the maximum population in any of the relevant cohorts was approximately 72,000. The relationship between the sub-components of writing and speaking skills was investigated using the TSA data from 2008 in an attempt to ascertain how strongly students' performances in writing correlate with their performances in speaking. We found only moderate correlations (0.49 – 0.55) between sub-components of the two macro skills in question. However, given the large sample size in question, even these 'moderate' correlations were statistically significant ($\alpha < 0.05$). Therefore, we can conclude that the relationship between student performances across macro skills is far too strong to be due to chance. However, it is important to note that written performance only predicted 24 to 30% of the variance in speaking performance. Further analysis showed that variance in P.3 speaking was larger than in P.3 writing and variance in P.6 writing was larger than in P.6 speaking, hence the correlations were somewhat suppressed. So at this stage we have to conclude that, our correlation levels indicated that transference between written and spoken skills is probably limited and that separate teaching strategies are probably required for each macro skill (i.e. writing and speaking). Yet it is important to note that P.3 assessment did not include a criterion for 'language' i.e. lexis and syntax which is one area where transference is likely to occur.

Keywords: language, skill, correlation

BACKGROUND

Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) is a standards-referenced assessment which was conceived as a 'low-stakes' test surveying the performance of student groups. The main purpose of TSA as seen by the Hong Kong Education Commission was to provide the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government and school management with information on **school** standards in key learning areas so that the Government would be able to identify schools in need of assistance for school improvement.

ORAL ASSESSMENT

The oral assessments for Primary English Language were conducted over two days, with one morning and one afternoon session each day. P.3 and P.6 students took part in the oral assessments on 6 or 7 May 2008 and 14 or 15 May 2008 respectively. In total, 546 schools at P.3 level and 587 schools at P.6 level participated in the oral assessments. Depending on the size of the school, 12 or 24 students were randomly selected to take part in the oral assessments for each language. The list of students selected for the assessment was not revealed until the day of the assessment to prevent any attempt to selectively coach students selected for the oral sampling. In order to create a more familiar environment for younger children, primary students were assessed by one internal examiner (a teacher at that school with whom the students would be familiar) and one external oral examiner (to ensure uniformity and fairness of assessment procedures).

WRITTEN ASSESSMENT

The English written component of the TSA consisted of listening, reading and writing and it was held on 19 June 2008 for P.3 and P.6. A total of approximately 128,000 students at P.3 and P.6 levels from 623 primary schools took part in TSA 2008. Each student attempted one writing task.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between speaking and writing development on L1 has been researched fairly extensively over several decades. Labov and Weletshky (1967) argued that competence in the spoken language was a necessary base for competence in writing and predicted it would be relatively difficult for the students with low proficiency in speaking to master written conventions. Cramer (1978) stressed that speaking influenced writing positively since written language derives from oral language. Kroll (1981) stated there was a developmental trend in speaking and writing, which progressed through different phases of development.

On the relationship between speaking and writing development on L2, Vann (1981) raised a number of questions regarding the relationship between these two macro skills:

- "How much transfer of learning can we expect from one language skill area to another?"

- "Will fluent speakers make good writers?"

- "Why do some students have particular difficulty with one mode or another?"

Kim (2000) pointed out the stages in L1 and L2 acquisition might not be the same. Florez and Hadaway (1987) stated that oral language development could have an effect on writing behaviour, but that oral language proficiency scores may not indicate what to expect from students' in written composition.

Hubert (2008) investigated the relationship between writing and speaking in the U.S. university Spanish language classroom. He found that weak correlation between speaking and writing at beginning levels of study, and much stronger correlation at the intermediate and advanced levels. Zhu (2007) conducted a study among 40 randomly selected college-level ESL students in one American university. He found that the college-level students with good speaking skills had good writing skills and vice versa (r values 0.67 - 0.86).

For young learners, National School English Literacy Survey in 1996 showed that the correlation between speaking and writing was 0.64 for Year 3 (Grade 3) students and 0.68 for Year 5 (Grade 5) students. However, it was considered likely that the same relationship might not be found in Hong Kong for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Hong Kong student cohort is a complex mix of native speakers, ESL and EFL students. However, a large proportion of the cohort tends more toward EFL characteristics. That is to say they do not use English for a significant amount of time outside English class. Secondly, integrative teaching of English is adopted in most Hong Kong schools where oral English only accounts for a small portion of teaching time. Class sizes are high, making it difficult for teachers to schedule a lot of oral work in class. Thirdly, there is an enormous variation in the amount of exposure which Hong Kong students get to oral English outside school. For example students who are cared for by a Filipina maid tend to learn oral English completely independently of what is happening to them at school. Other students also learn oral English outside school from a number of sources, movies, TV, music, coaching colleges, friends or relatives who are expats or overseas educated Chinese. Students' ability to access such oral English learning opportunities (and therefore their facility with oral English varies enormously due to social economic, familial and geographic factors which usually bear no relationship to what the student is doing in the English class at school). Taking all these factors into account, it seems unlikely that the correlations reported by Zhu 2007 (opcit) would pertain in the Hong Kong school context.

PURPOSE

This study aims at investigating the relationship between the sub-components of English writing and speaking skills among Hong Kong primary students (i.e. Primary 3 and Primary 6).

METHODOLOGY

1. The correlations between the sub-components of writing and speaking skills were calculated using Pearson's r from the TSA 2008 data in an attempt to ascertain whether students' overall performances in writing correlated with their performances in speaking at statistically significant level. Conversion of the sum of all ratings to a scaled score was in place.

2. Since the speaking paper was assessed on a sampling basis (normally 24 students per school), a total of over 11,000 and 12,000 student oral and writing performances at Primary 3 and Primary 6 levels were analysed in this study.

3. 'Content' and 'language' were the common sub-components shared by both skills at P.6. For Primary 6, the ratings given by two examiners in the two-minute 'individual oral presentation' component and 'teacher-student interaction' on a given topic were compared with those in the writing task. (See Appendix 1 'P.6 TSA 2008 Writing and Speaking Task Samples'.)

4. For Primary 3, the ratings given by two examiners in the two-minute 'picture description' component (where the examiner asked students questions based on a given picture(s)) and 'expression of personal experiences' were compared with those in the writing task. However, P.3 speaking assessment did not include a criterion for 'language' and so 'content' was the only common sub-component shared by both skills at Primary 3. (See Appendix 2 'P.3 TSA 2008 Writing and Speaking Task Samples')

FINDINGS

Only 'moderate' level of correlation between writing and speaking was found in terms of the 'content' component for P.3 students r = 0.55 ($\alpha < 0.05$) approximately 30% of variance. This relationship is shown in Table 1. With P.6 students the correlation between their written and spoken 'content' scores was 0.49 ($\alpha < 0.05$), approximately 24% of variance. However, with P.6 students another criterion was included in the assessment − 'language'. In the case of P.6 'language', the correlation between oral and written scores for 'language was 0.54 ($\alpha < 0.05$), approximately 29% of variance.

Table 1. Relationship between the sub-components of writing and speaking skills

Level/Criterion	P.3 Writing 'Content'	P.6 Writing 'Language'	P.6 Writing 'Content'
Primary 3 Speaking 'Content'	**0.55**		
Primary 6 Speaking 'Content'			**0.49**
Primary 6 Speaking 'Language'		**0.54**	

Note: $\alpha < 0.05$

In order to make more sense of these correlations, we also refer to the means and standard deviations (S.D.) for the various criteria at both P.3 and P.6 levels. In Primary 6, the correlations between speaking 'content' (SC) and writing 'content' (WC) are 'slightly moderate' because there is more variance in WC than in SC (i.e. P6 WC > P6 SC). Conversely, in Primary 3, the correlations are 'slightly moderate' between SC and WC because the variance in SC is greater than in WC (i.e. P3 WC < P3 SC).

DISCUSSION

The S.D. of WC is smaller than that of SC at P.3 level while the S.D. of WC is larger than that of SC at P.6 level. This raises two interesting questions. "Why does student score variance in oral start off as lower than their variance in written?" "Why does this trend reverse itself by

Primary 6?"   This could be because when students get to Primary 6, they are receiving uniform formulaic genre specific coaching for their oral tasks.   Because of large class size, schools simply cannot give students the same amount work on spoken English as what they give them on written English.   Therefore, written skills probably develop faster than oral skills and therefore we encounter more divergence in and hence more variance in written work later in primary school.

Unfortunately, there is no separate 'language' criterion for Primary 3 oral; so we are unable to ascertain the relationship between spoken 'language' scores and written 'language' scores in this area at P.3 level.

Once we take into account the suppression of correlation results by difference in variance between macro skills, we can see that there is still some evidence for transference.   This is apparent that at P.6 level (P.3 orals were not marked for 'language').   So evidence for transference is stronger in the case of 'language' than for 'content'.   This is hardly surprising since structures and lexis acquired in written exercises should be available for students to use in their oral production (provided they can pronounce them).   For example, an oral presentation is not structurally very different from a short written composition.   As for the direction of the transference, it would be reasonable to suppose that it is going from written work to spoken work and not the other way around.   This supposition is based on the fact that most Hong Kong students in the sample would be ESL but more toward the EFL end of the spectrum.   (Such students acquire the bulk of their English from school and the fact is that written English is given more time and emphasis in Hong Kong schools than spoken English.)

This notion runs opposite to that of Florez and Hadaway (1987) who stated that oral language development could have an effect on writing behaviour.   What we are suggesting in the case of Hong Kong students is that their writing behaviour has an effect on their oral English.   Hence, to develop students' oral skills we need to facilitate transference.   To do this, we need to ensure that students can pronounce the words that they can write.   Hence more post-writing activities involving reading aloud and increased class time on each topic are recommended.   The figures also suggest that transference between written and spoken skills is probably limited and that separate teaching strategies are probably required for each macro skill (i.e. writing and speaking).

When scrutinising TSA2008 data, some data points found in P.6 speaking are not found in P.6 writing, for example, when a student gets a score of 3 in 'content' (total score is 8) for speaking, he or she usually gets a score of $7 - 8$ in 'language' (total score is 8).   However, this is not the case in writing.   In other words, a student's 'content' score in speaking does not predict his/her 'language' score to the same extent us it does in writing.   This is most likely because the skills required in speaking are 'on the fly' and more demanding than that in writing.   Many lexical items (e.g. phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions) have a specific syntactic environment or range thereof in which they need to be embedded (Bickel & Nichols, 2007; Boulton, 2008; Jones, 2007).   Recalling more 'advanced' lexical items throws an extra cognitive load on the students because such items are less frequently used and therefore demand more effort to recall (McKeown, et al., 1985).   Cheung (forthcoming) theorises that this extra 'recall effort' may reduce the 'processing power' that students have available for constructing coherence in text (content).   Thus, there is the need for 'on the fly' processing in oral can suppress students' ability to meaningfully transfer structures and lexis from writing to create coherence.   Therefore, students need genre specific practice in oral English in order to develop their 'on the fly processing capability'.   Moreover, students need oral practice which gives them opportunities in producing structures and lexis to facilitate coherence 'on the fly'.

CONCLUSION

The results showed only moderate correlations (0.49 – 0.55) between equivalent sub-components of the two macro skills (e.g. spoken content and written content).   However, given the large sample size in question, even these 'moderate' correlations were statistically significant ($\alpha < 0.05$).   In other words, the relationship between student performances across macro skills is far too strong to be due to chance.   Further analysis showed differences in variance between oral and written skills was likely to have suppressed our correlation.   Despite that, the 'moderate' correlation levels indicated that transference between written and spoken skills is limited by the constraints of the 'on the fly' processing required for oral production.   Therefore, we can conclude that although separate teaching strategies are probably required for each macro skill (i.e. writing and speaking), transference from writing to speaking is occurring and needs to be encouraged in classroom instruction and in homework.   Students' performance on both skills in specific genres (for example, story-telling, personal recounts, etc) is a promising area of investigation for future research.   We also hope to investigate the developmental trend of both macro skills using longitudinal data from members of TSA 2008 P.3 cohort who will also participate in P.6 TSA in 2010.

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Primary 6 TSA 2008 Writing Task Samples

Primary 6 TSA 2008 Speaking Task Samples

Teacher-Student Interaction
- What do you usually do with your family at home?
- Where do you go with your family at weekends?
- What do you do with your family there?
- Which place do you like going to with your family most? Why?
- Do you like spending time with your family? Why/Why not?

Primary 3 TSA 2008 Writing Task Sample   **Primary 3 TSA 2008 Speaking Task Sample**

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