How learners of English learn best in a foreign language context? *A glimpse of the debate over the written versus the spoken form*

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Abstract
The primacy of speech in second language learning and the relative lack of importance of the written form have triggered a continuous debate in the field of language teaching methodology. The various approaches which have been developed throughout the years emphasise the importance of the spoken language. Therefore, the written form has been taken for granted in most teaching methodologies. This paper considers the question of whether second language learners learn best through spoken or written language. It reviews the literature with regard to how speaking and writing have been taught in the last two decades. In addition, it describes the differences between spoken and written forms of languages. The paper then presents some characteristics and features of both language forms and states the situation of teaching English in a foreign language context. The paper concludes that both spoken and written aspects of any language are important in language learning and they both complement one another. Second language learners need to learn both aspects in order to master the language. The degree of exposure to spoken or written language is yet determined by the learners' purpose for learning the language.
Keywords: English as a foreign language, language learning, spoken language, teaching methodologies, written language

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Introduction

The debate on the primacy of speech in the various language teaching methodologies has existed since the Seventeenth Century. The original methods of language teaching emphasise the necessity of learning the spoken form of the target language (Banathy & Sawyer, 1969). These methods also particularly focus on conversational ability. It was commonly agreed in the past that learning a language should start by speaking followed by reading. Written language is solely "…a means of representing speech in another medium" (Lyons, 1968, p. 38). The focus on speech has come as a result of many perceptions as noted by Cook (2004). Advocates of the notion that believes in the natural acquisition of the language, such as Harmer (1998), stress that all children acquire their first language without studying its written form. Furthermore, spoken language existed many years before the invention of the written form and that some languages such as Swiss German and Ulster Scots do not have written systems (Cook, 2004). The illiteracy rate has also contributed to some extent to the primacy of speech over writing. That is to say, there are a number of people who cannot use the written language. In addition to these points, some teachers argue that most second language learners favour learning the spoken language and that learners' purpose of studying the second language is to be good at communicating with speakers of that language.

However, this argument was short-lived. The primacy of speech had been reduced by language textbook writers in the Eighteenth and the first half of the Nineteenth Centuries (Banathy & Sawyer, 1969). Back then, the main language focus was on teaching the rules of grammar and structures and the learners' mother tongue was used to acquire the target language. This claim can be seen more clearly in the grammar-translation method which ignored the spoken form of the target language and put a great emphasis on the written form. Howatt (1984) asserts that the grammar-translation method required practice and contained exercises of various kinds, typically sentences for translation into and out of the foreign language, which were another novel feature of this method.

Furthermore, the grammar-translation method was described as a means of acquiring a language by analysing its grammatical rules first, and then applying the acquired knowledge through translating texts into and out of the target language (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Speaking and listening exercises in the target language were not included and native language was used as the medium of instruction. The main aim of this approach was to develop the learners' reading skills and help them to gain knowledge of the grammatical structures. The major representative of the grammar-translation method was Plotz who adopted this method in the late Nineteenth Century (Banathy & Sawyer, 1969). Nevertheless, the trend towards the written language was criticised in the second half of the Nineteenth Century which witnessed an extensive interest in the spoken language. Advocates of this movement claimed that learning a language can be achieved by intensive listening and reading, followed by speaking and writing (Hennes, 1866). This method was also criticised in terms of the learners' inability to use the target language for communication.

As a result of researchers' and practitioners' criticisms and dissatisfaction with the grammar-translation method, the direct-method was developed. It emphasised the importance of the spoken form in second language acquisition. In addition, the audiolingual method was also developed in order to improve the oral skills first, and then the written skills. Yule (2017)

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describes this method as follows:

> Audiolingual method, a very different approach, emphasizing the spoken language, became popular in the 1950s. This involved a systematic presentation of the structures of the L2, moving from the simple to the more complex, often in the form of drills which the students had to repeat. This approach, called the Audiolingual method, was strongly influenced by the belief that the fluent use of a language was essentially a set of 'habits' which could be developed with a lot of practice. (p. 212)

This was strongly supported by Palmer (1917) who states that "We are endowed by nature with powers which enable us to use the spoken form of any language, and that these powers are to be activated to learn the spoken form of the spoken language." (p.540). He also notes that by ignoring ear-training the learners will be unaware of certain sounds which, in turn, lead them to replace the unknown sounds with ones from their native language. Despite the features of audiolingualism, some arguments arose that were critical of this method. Opponents, such as Harmer (1998), allege that this kind of lesson, which focused heavily on drills and repetition, was teacher-centred in that the teacher played a key role in the classroom. In addition, it required teachers with native or native-like language ability which made it even more difficult to operate.

As a response to the audiolingual method, the communicative language teaching approach was developed with a particular focus on meaning rather than on grammatical structures. It aims at promoting interaction in the target language by using authentic materials and engaging the learners' experiences in the learning situations (Nunan, 1991). Communicative language teaching endeavours to connect the language learning situations in the classroom to real-life activities outside the classroom; yet, like many other methods, it has been criticised. Swan (1985) argues that learners are aware of the different skills for the negotiation of meaning, but what they need to know are more lexical items in order to help them to communicate successfully in the target language. Furthermore, Aaron and Joshi (2006) conducted a study examining the extent to which the written language can be considered to be as a natural process as the spoken language. Their study revealed that spoken and written language are alike. The written form has an intrinsic importance which develops over time, and it is also comparatively independent of the spoken language.

In contrast to the aforementioned points, Smith (1976) argues that the aims of any language learning should be specific elements of both spoken and written forms of the language. These two forms are needed in learning a language but the question would be, which one is the most helpful, or do they both have the same value? In fact, both spoken and written aspects are important in language learning and they complement one another. Second language learners need to learn both aspects in order to master the language. The degree of exposure to spoken or written language is yet determined by the learners' purpose for learning the language.

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Differences between spoken and written language

Spoken and written forms have often been examined together in the field of language learning. There are two reasons that have led researchers to study both forms at the same time (Garton & Pratt, 1989). Firstly, the definition of the learning process requires both systems. Garton and Pratt (1989) defined learning as the mastery of the spoken language as well as the written form that includes reading and writing. Therefore, both forms of the language are urgently needed to achieve the learning outcomes which eventually led to linking them together. Secondly, although the spoken language preceded the written language by many years, they have been examined historically and developmentally. The development of the written form of the language would inevitably lead to the development of the spoken form (Garton & Pratt, 1989).

Although some similarities between the two forms have been highlighted as both have some aspect in common in the planning or conceptualisation of the message, the differences between them have received considerable attention in the body of research. Garton and Pratt (1989) classify these differences into three categories - differences of form, differences of function and differences in the manner of presentation. The first type means that spoken language is momentary and requires ears in order to listen to the talk, whereas written language is more permanent and requires eyes to read the written word (Cook, 2004). Additionally, the spoken form seems to be more sociable and quicker than the written form, the speaker can involve the listener by talking, whether by using tag questions which request a reply or by using phrases such as 'you know' or 'see what I mean?'. This is different from the written form which is considered as a solitary work in that there is no need for another person while writing. Also, the written form has been seen as a slow process which can be revised as drafts before production. These differences in form generate the second type - differences in function. In the spoken language where there is usually a speaker and a listener, the participants can use informal language and style. Functional differences are correlated with situational differences. In some situations, the written language can have certain functions which do not exist with regard to the spoken language, and vice versa. For instance, the completion of a withdrawal form at a bank absolutely requires the written form, while if someone is interviewed on a radio programme, s/he will have to speak as it is required by the situation. Cook (2004) also stresses the necessity for the presence of both the speaker and the listener in the speech situation. Yet, there is no need for the writer and the reader to meet each other.

It seems difficult to ignore the differences in grammar and vocabulary in the spoken and the written language. There are some words which are rare in the spoken language, but which, on the other hand, exist and are widely used in the written form. With regard to grammatical differences, many new words and grammatical structures have their derivations from the spoken form. Cook (2004) notes that:

> Much written language consists of short sentences that do not form part of a longer discourse [whereas] spoken language usually demands a greater coherence; short verbless sentences ...[and] tend to be analysed as part of larger units such as conversations and exchanges. (p. 43)

Furthermore, lexical density is another serious difference between spoken and written language

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as, by comparing content and function words, written language is considered much denser than the spoken form. So, content words such as nouns, verbs and adjectives are very common in written texts and seldom occur in the spoken form.

Distinctive features of spoken and written language

Halliday (1989, p. 31) provides many characteristics of the spoken language such as 'variation in speed', 'loudness or quietness', 'intonation', 'stress', 'rhythm', 'pitch range', 'gestures - body language' and 'pausing and phrasing'. Also, hesitation fillers are believed to be one of the most obvious characteristics of the spoken language. These fillers such as, 'um', 'err' and 'like' give the speaker more time to think of what to say next, but are not found in the written language. While speaking we use intonation for signalling grammatical structure or emotional attitudes (Cook, 2004). However, the 'punctuation system' indicates parallel meaning to the 'tone of speech" although these punctuation marks do not accurately match the meaning of the raising or falling of the pitch of the voice. The use of stress has been identified as a unique marker of the spoken mode as emphasised by Xie et al. (2004) who considered stress as a form of status in the spoken language.

Looking into the features of the written language, obviously punctuation is the most distinguishable feature. Punctuation can powerfully change the meaning of the intended message and it helps in organising the writing. Punctuation has other purposes that are not signalled in speech at all, such as the use of capital letters to signal proper names and sentence beginnings (Cook, 2004). The written form can offer a different vocabulary by utilising different types of spelling which may not be feasible in the spoken form. The written system is also a planned work that can be written and revised many times as drafts, compared with the spontaneity of speech.

Evaluating the teaching of English in EFL contexts

In most contexts where English is taught as a forging language (EFL), English is only practiced inside classrooms; and there is little chance for learners to speak English and improve their speaking skills outside. However, the sole focus on the spoken language with beginners may not be recommended in an EFL context for some reasons. Namely, the English writing system needs to be emphasised in the language curriculum, especially in the early stages of learning. There is a great need to make learners aware of the different system of the target language. Furthermore, teaching learners the basics of writing and the grammatical forms may work as an advance-organiser which can help them recognise the different patterns of speech (Thornbury, 1999). Helping learners to communicate effectively in the target language is one of the aims of teaching English in most EFL contexts; however, this aim seems hard to achieve. In reality, the speaking skill is paid little attention to unless the teacher asks a direct question in which the focus would be on the information provided, rather than on practicing speaking. Although learners may show a fairly good mastery of the writing system, neglecting the spoken mode affects their understanding of the spoken discourse and their later communication with speakers of the target language.

In response to the question addressed in this paper's title about how leaners of English language learn best in an EFL context, it can be said that learners should be exposed to both the spoken and written modes equally at all stages of language learning. The spoken form enhances learners' communication skills, and the written form strengthens their knowledge of the writing

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system and the grammar of the target language. Since the issue of spoken and written language is still being debated, educationalists and text-book writers in EFL contexts should adopt more effective teaching methods and the proportion of each system needs to be balanced in the curricula. The purpose of studying a foreign language differs among learners; so, their needs and purposes should be considered when it comes to the teaching methodology. Furthermore, focusing on one part of the language and neglecting the other is neither a satisfying nor an effective method of teaching a foreign language. Hedge (2000) calls for a multi-dimensional syllabus such as: organization, meaning, skills and topics. Additionally, Swan (1985) emphasises that form and meaning should receive the same emphasis in teaching a foreign language. Smith (1976) also notes that second language learners need certain elements from both the spoken and the written form in the learning process.

Additionally, the use of mother tongue in language classrooms should not be completely banned in early stages of language learning. Learners at this level need to use their language in order to comprehend the target language. They also communicate better if the teacher speaks their first language (Schweers, 1999). However, this should not be overused as it may affect the learners' abilities in expressing themselves in the target language (Harbord, 1992).

Conclusion
This paper has tried to shed some light on the debate with regard to the primacy of speech in various language teaching methods. Spoken language has been the deterministic form in most teaching methodologies, yet some methods considered the written mode as a significant part of language learning. The relationship between the spoken and the written language has been debated for a long time. They are both crucial in all stages of language learning, especially for beginners. Therefore, there should be a balance between the two aspects when a syllabus is designed for language learners.

About the Author
Dr. Fatimah Almutrafi an assistant professor at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from Newcastle University, Newcastle, United Kingdom. Her research interests include: language learning in EFL contexts, bilingualism, and the relationship between language and cognition in bilinguals and second language learners.

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