

# Writing Skills in English among School Children

## Gender Differences, Relationship with Class Performance and with Speaking Skills

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### **Abstract**

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*Present study focuses on gender differences in writing skills, relationship of writing skills with oral skills and with class performance. A sample of 90 boys and 90 girls from fourth grade were selected to study gender differences. A set of 70 students of seventh grade were assessed for relationship of writing skills with oral skills and with class performance. Writing was assessed on a set of familiar topic and spelling and speaking on seven familiar questions. For class performance, scores of half yearly exams and two unit tests were taken. Girls outperformed boys in writing skills and writing skills were significantly correlated with speaking skills and with class performance.*

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In today's modern world, English has emerged to occupy position of lingua franca in areas of business, education, information sharing, computer work and life in general. Much of literature is written in English. It is the most often spoken language. Even after six

and half decades of British rule in India, no regional language or Hindi has been able to replace it. Most Indians get used to a particular style, pronunciation, nuances, phonology, grammar and other emphases laid on various aspects of their mother

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tongue. Confusion begins when they begin to learn English which has a different pattern and set of rules. This happens all the more when they start to learn English late in childhood. Thus, the importance of examining development of learning various aspects of this language viz writing, speaking, spellings, class performance etc. in school life can never be overestimated.

Writing is a complex language skill which requires planning, organizing, recalling spellings, translating and reviewing. These processes involve demands on cognitive processes.

The exercise of writing task begins as early as a child gets admitted to the school. The ability to write correctly and effectively is one such thing, whose foundation is laid in the school. School authorities provide ample opportunities to the pupils so that they develop a capacity to write and express their thoughts independently.

Writing skill is important for life of a person more specially during student life. The National Commission on Writing (2003) points out if students have to learn, they must write.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- (1) To identify the gender differences in writing skills in English language among students at school level.
- (2) To explore the relationship of writing skills of students with

their speaking skills and class performance.

### **HYPOTHESES**

- (1) The performance of girls on writing skills will be significantly better than boys.
- (2) Writing skills of students in English will significantly be correlated with their speaking skills in English.
- (3) Writing skills of students are significantly correlated with their class performers.

### **Operational definitions of the terms used**

**Writing Skills:** This included expressive writing skills and spelling performance. Expressive writing skills were assessed by having children to write on a number of familiar topics. Spelling performance was assessed by a standard diagnostic tool on spellings.

**Gender differences:** In this study, gender differences mean differences in performance of boys and girls in both expressive writing and spelling performance.

**Class Performance:** Class Performance was an average of academic performance in half yearly exams and two unit tests in English.

**Speaking skills:** These were assessed by having subjects to answer seven questions to obtain around 15-20 spoken sentences.

## METHODOLOGY

For investigating questions of interest, descriptive research method was used.

## SAMPLE

Ninety boys and 90 girls from fourth grade (class IV) of government and private schools from Chandigarh were selected for studying gender differences in writing skills.

Another set of 70 students of seventh grade (class VII) were selected randomly from Government schools of Chandigarh for assessing relationship of (a) writing skills and speaking skills (b) writing skills and class performance. The idea of taking students from a higher class to assess relationship between variables was to have students with reasonably developed speaking skills.

Schools and subjects (students) both were chosen randomly in both the cases.

## TOOLS

- Ten topics familiar to students were used to examine expressive writing among 4th graders.
- These topics are 1. My family, 2. Myself, 3. My School, 4. My friend, 5. My favourite sport, 6. Chandigarh, 7. My favourite actor, 8. My favourite television serial, 9. My teacher, and 10. Morning walk.
- To assess spelling skills, Diagnostic Spelling Test (Gupta and Narang, 2005) was utilised. This test has 35 words' spellings. It has been standardised on third and fourth grades. Discriminating

validity and content validity was established in this test. Split half reliability and criterion validity of test are .92 and .82 respectively.

- Another set of ten topics for expressive writing were used for assessing expressive writing in 7th graders. These are; 1. My school, 2. A holiday, 3. My parents, 4. My teacher, 5. Cricket, 6. Trees, 7. My hobby, 8. My country, 9. My best friend, and 10. My favourite animal.
- To know the level of speaking skills, a set of seven familiar questions mentioned in were asked from students. The idea was to get a sample of 15-20 sentences from each of them. These questions are given below:
  - Tell me something about yourself.
  - Tell me something about your school.
  - Briefly narrate your daily schedule from getting up in the morning till going to bed in night.
  - Tell me how will you spend your Sunday.
  - Which subject you like the most and why?
  - Which teacher you like the most and why?
  - Who is your best friend and why?

Scores of half yearly exams and two unit tests were taken into account. An average of these scores was calculated to mark class performance in English.

## PROCEDURE

Fourth grade subjects were to select any three topics from Appendix I to write six lines on each of those. Scoring was done by using Developmental Sentence Scoring Key (Lee, 1974).

Seventh grade subjects were to choose any two topics from Appendix II to write about fifteen sentences in all. Scoring was done on a ten point scale keeping in mind the following: number of complete meaningful sentences, spellings and grammatical mistakes. To prevent subjectivity, another scorer also scored the same performance. An average of the two scores was used for analysis which were significantly correlated ( $r=0.52$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

For speaking skills, a set of questions suited to class seventh was asked to generate about 15-20 spoken sentences. These sentences were recorded and later transcribed. Scoring was done on a ten point scale keeping in mind the following: the number of complete meaningful sentences, pronunciation and fluency in speaking. Again, to prevent subjectivity, another scorer also scored the same performance. An average of these two scores was used which were significantly inter-correlated ( $r=0.59$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

For class performance, scores of students in English were obtained from the school authorities. An average of half yearly exam and two unit tests was calculated to mark class performance in English.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 1. Gender Differences in Writing Skills

Verbal performance and verbal cognitive processing between boys and girls have been found to be different (Emanuelson and Stevenson, 1990; Halpern, 1992). Subsequent to, and prior to this, there have been many researches indicating that differences exist in writing performance as well between both of them (Swan, 1992; Denton and West, 2002; Bannon, 2004;

Justice, Invernizzi, Geller, Sullivan and Welsch, 2005; Hanna, 2005; Mead, 2006; Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman and Raskind, 2008; Parker, 2010).

Levy and Heller (1992) pointed out that language areas in brain which process reading and writing are located in different brain sections among girls and boys. In males, these functions are taken care of primarily by left hemisphere. However, in females they are spread in both the hemispheres. The authors suggested that girls are able to better integrate learning for writing.

Halpern and La May (2000) suggested that gender differences exist in some of the tests of cognitive abilities. While males were found to have an edge over females in their ability to manipulate visual images in working memory, the females had an advantage in retrieving from long term memory store and acquiring and using verbal information.

Gurian and Stevens (2004) inferred from their researches that the girls have, in their temporal lobe stronger neural networks than boys do. These networks facilitate more detailed memory storage and better listening skills. They can discriminate in tones of voice better than boys. Girls can put all this to their advantage for details in writing works.

Mckenzie (2007) mentioned that the differences in writing abilities of males and females was visible in a young age and this difference increased as they grew in years. The girls were ahead in 70% of the tasks.

Beard and Burrell (2010) analysed three aspects viz. imaginative, narrative and persuasive of writing of 9 to 10 year old subjects for gender differences. The texts produced by children were analysed using test guidelines and genre-specific rating scales. Girls were found to be better in writing achievement. Analysis of five parts of writing showed that girls scored significantly higher in four in both the years. A subgroup of the highest-achieving children contained lesser number of boys. Textual effectiveness, content or language use did not reveal any gender variations.

Anthony, Giles, Bradac and Palomares (2013) proposed a new explanation of Gender Linked Language Effect. They tested this explanation that each gender has socialised schema of how s/he normatively communicates by getting subjects to describe five photographs. First one was to be

described in simple manner, other four descriptions under two gender guises, each of these guises had further two options— description to a male or to a female. Discriminant analysis showed that words used by respondents in man's guise was different from that in woman's guise, supporting gender linked language schemata. Findings corroborated new gender linked language model.

Serholt (2012) investigated the overall frequency in which Swedish advanced learners of English used epistemic modality to express doubt (hedges) and certainty (boosters) in their academic writing; and if there seemed to be gender-related differences. A comparative analysis of 20 randomly selected C-essays written by Swedish students of English at several universities was therefore conducted. Slight indications were found suggesting that girls offered stronger commitments to the propositional information they produced than boys besides some other findings.

Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers and Lawrence (2013) examined a convenience sample of 618 subjects selected from Class 4th through 10th, except Class 8th. Subjects were administered a measure of writing motivation and activity scale. They also submitted a time bound sample of narrative writing. Teacher's judgment of writing ability of subjects was also obtained. Results indicated that girls and older subjects wrote qualitatively better fiction. This was also true for

subjects having better level of writing skill as per teacher's rating. More frequent writing work was done by girl students, higher level writers, and students younger in age. Path analysis showed that writing activity changed with grade and gender. Gender, teacher judgment, and writing activity had effect on some aspects of writing motivation.

Gurpreet (2013) investigated oral skills and writing skills among fifth graders. She found that there were no gender differences in written word points, written sentence points, written compound sentence points and written errors, though the sample size in this study was small ( 14 males and 19 females). In this study, significant gender differences in oral skills in English language were found to exist in favour of girls.

Kaur (2014) examined writing skills in Punjabi among boys and girls of urban schools. She found that girls perform significantly better in spelling accuracy, word points and meaningful sentences. Also boys scored significantly higher in spelling errors.

'Girls outperform boys yet again' was the report carried by Indian Express (Goyal and Dhillon, 2014) which indicated results of class tenth exam of CBSE board. All these performances were based on writing of various types, some creative, some based on memory and some on analysis.

It appears certain that males differ from females in writing

performance. If Levy and Heller's indication (1992) is to be believed, then females are at an advantageous position for writing. Halpern and La May (2000) and Gurian and Stevens (2004) also suggest similar advantage. More recent findings also suggest quantitative and qualitative differences in boys and girls in favour of latter.

## **2. Speaking Skills**

All individuals learn to speak, whichever language. According to Myklebust (1960), auditory expressive language is evidenced in speech which emerges at around one year of age which is for the language most spoken in presence of child. Speaking is universal and inevitable part of human environment. Everybody (barring children with severe hearing impairment, severe speech impairment and cerebral palsy) can speak at least one language. A child learns speaking with no conscious effort and conscious instruction.

Developing such speaking skills in second language such as English is not that effortless. This requires planned instruction and conscious effort.

Normally audience looks at the speaker while listening to him/her. Standing in front of an audience can often give stage fright to a novice speaker. S/he may be worried about making mistakes, being scrutinised and criticised by listeners or embarrassment in presence of other students. This may



lead to a lot of mistakes or a situation of total silence. Besides learner inhibition, lack of motivation, lack of knowledge of subject matter, lack of good vocabulary, lack of confidence, anxiety, inadequate listening, family background, shy nature etc. (Latha and Patella, 2012) would make or mar a performance in speaking skills.

Research in oral skills has received extensive attention in many areas: achievement and classroom talk (Flanders, 1970); oral communication and critical thinking skills (Noblette and Lynette, 2010); oral fluency and dyslexia (Gupta and Randhava, 2012); oral skills and classroom behavior (Singh, 2013); gender differences in spoken English among children with English as a first language (Aquini, 2014) to mention a few.

### **3. Writing Skills and Speaking Skills**

Following is a brief account of literature on relationship of above two aspects of language:

Wilkinson (1965) pointed out that the development of oral skills would lead to enhanced skills in reading and writing as language users become increasingly proficient. Oral language plays a role in literacy development.

According to Cregon (1998) speaking, reading and writing aspects of language depend on each other and on a common set of phonological, semantic and grammatical structures, as well as some common processes or goals.

Dallimore, Hertenstein and Platt (2008) investigated effect of participation practices on development of communication based skills. participation practices were used as an instructional technique. Results showed evidence of effectiveness of instructional technique. Active preparation on part of students and active participation in discussion in class contributed in improvement in both spoken and written communication skills. Findings suggested that class discussion can prove to be beneficial to both types of programmes: cross cultural courses and stand alone courses.

Catherine and Hutchison (2009) predicted about effect of a four week long programme of telephone mediated language intervention, on young children's recontextualisation processes in narrative expression. Findings showed that experience of telephone mediated language intervention affects both written and oral narrative expression.

Hale (2010) examined efficacy of thematic units for struggling readers in oral language in receptive, expressive and written vocabulary areas. They used these thematic units in small groups. The attitudes and effects on students regarding their participation were evaluated. Results depicted positive associations.

Taylor, Greenberg, Daphne and Laures (2012) found that there was a correlation among oral language skills, written language skills and reading comprehension.

Puranik and AlOtaiba (2012) assessed development of beginning writing skills among children studying in kindergarten school. 242 children were administered tests in cognitive, oral language, reading and writing areas. Two elements i.e. handwriting and spelling contributed significantly to expression in writing.. Oral language and reading skills were not found to contribute to writing significantly.

Puranik, Cynthia, Lonigan and Christopher (2012) examined whether children with reading impairments also experience writing difficulties. They worked on a group of 293 pre-schoolers and inferred that children having weak oral skills lagged behind their class peers in terms of their skills related to writing.

Gurpreet (2013) examined oral skills in relation to writing skills among fifth graders. It was found that no co-relation existed in oral and written word points, oral and written sentence points, and oral and written compound sentence points. However, a significant co-relation was found in oral and written errors. These points were earned by subjects in dictated writing of sentences and words, and expressive speaking. The sample in this study as pointed out earlier, since was small, the findings need verification.

Hubert (2013) examined the development of efficiency in speaking and writing in Spanish as a foreign language by carrying out an interview in oral proficiency and writing skills

test for students admitted in courses of three different stages. A correlation was calculated among scores in speaking and writing performance. Results indicated a fairly strong correlation between the two skills among students. A weaker correlation between the two was seen when performance in each of the groups was analysed individually. Some students showed more proficiency in writing as compared to speaking; some others showed an opposite trend, and still others were equally proficient in both the skills.

Majority of researches and literature mentioned above indicate an association in speaking and writing skills.

#### **4. Class Performance**

Performance in schools, majority of times, is assessed by writing, few times by oral methods and rarely by methods involving doing. In language subjects, writing assumes more importance because doing is almost irrelevant and oral assessment, though necessary, is individualistic in nature hence time consuming and does not yield complete picture. Hence, it does not find itself used often to evaluate. Based on this practice, class performance in this study is assessed by written component of achievement in English. A comprehensive approach was adopted to get as close as possible to the picture of students' performance in English. Scores of half yearly exams and two unit tests were taken into account. An average



of these scores was calculated to mark class performance. It may be noted here that class performance in this research is on routinely studied matters whereas expressive writing is not done on commonly studied topics (though subjects are familiar with them) and spelling performance is on a standardised test.

### **5. Writing Skills and Class Performance**

Since writing is used in every subject during evaluation in school systems, it appears rational to assume that students, who are adept at writing, will perform well in general in class in English language. Previous literature tends to support this.

Bangert-Drowns, Hurley and Wilkinson (2004) conducted meta-analysis of 48 school programmes. The objective of these programmes was to examine effect of an intervention named 'writing to learn' on academic attainment. The meta-analysis indicated that writing skills can exercise a small, positive effect on dependent variable. The increased length of intervention predicted increased academic achievement. The use of metacognitive prompts also predicted enhanced impact of intervention. When intervention was implemented in Grades 6–8 and longer writing assignments were given, it led to reduced effect on academic achievement. Reasons suggested for the enhancement are as follows: writing approximates human speech, it supports learning strategies used

by subjects, and it functions to elevate academic performance.

Southern Regional Education Board (2008) emphasised the importance of reading and writing skills in both education and career. The objective was to integrate reading and writing skills along the range of curriculum in academic, career and technical courses. It was done in ways that improved student achievement in reading and writing and in the subject content areas. It is mentioned that if students could not read and write for learning, they would struggle and potentially fail. This would obviously affect their academic achievement.

Harrison (2009) examined literacy profiles of undergraduates (UG) having writing difficulties who were academically at risk by administering cognitive, word-level reading, spelling and writing measures. He compared the performance in these areas with their regular counterparts. The areas of lower performance of at risk UG students were: sight reading, lexicon decision, alpha RAN, making rhyming decisions for words which varied in visual and orthographic similarity. At risk learners also wrote miss spellings that were orthographically less plausible, and made more spelling errors. Findings have been discussed in relation to the importance of word-specific knowledge for skilled writing which in turn influenced the class performance.

Prat-Sala and Redford (2012) studied the relationships of performance of subjects in a) essay

writing and b) self-efficacy measures in reading and writing. This was done in an assessed written coursework. 145 freshmen and sophomores studying Psychology formed the sample. The results point out that both self efficacy measures were related to writing performance. Also results demonstrated the significance of self efficacy in reading and writing in relation to subjects' performance.

Kingir, Geban and Gunel (2012) investigated the influence of the intervention named Science Writing Heuristic (SWH) approach on achievement. Four intact classes of grade nine which were taught by 2 chemistry teachers were selected. This yielded two experimental and two control groups. Subjects in the experimental group were told to use SWH approach whereas those in the control group were given routine traditional instruction. Analysis was conducted by using ANCOVA. It emerged that the Science writing heuristic approach contributed to subjects' test performances significantly more than the traditional approach. Also, low and middle achievers in the treatment group performed significantly higher than those in the control group during the post-test stage.

Preiss, Castillo, Flotts and Martin (2013) investigated educational correlates and gender differences of writing and critical thinking in higher education. A group of 452 freshmen from Chile comprised the sample. The question of interest

was whether performance in test on augmentative writing was co-related with a) assessments in inferential and argument analysis, b) syllogism and c) academics. The latter was taken from high school achievements and two admission tests' performance. Findings indicated that the data obtained from analysis of writing and thinking performance was in consonance with that obtained from academic assessments.

Many centers around the globe which administer programs to enhance academic achievement, provide training in writing skills, besides other components ([www.johnmarshall.edu/ajmls-students/academicachievement](http://www.johnmarshall.edu/ajmls-students/academicachievement); [www.20.csueastbay.edu/library/scaa/workshops-wst-info.html](http://www.20.csueastbay.edu/library/scaa/workshops-wst-info.html) both retrieved on June 5th, 2014).

As far as development of language is concerned, proficient writing skill is ultimate among all its aspects. To be able to acquire it would be to enable oneself to communicate any academic ideas to peers, evaluators, teachers, parents and any other consumers, be it any subject-informative, logical and mathematical, or language. The following is hypothesised on the basis of above literature and arguments.

## RESULTS

To describe data, mean, standard deviation, have been used. To examine gender differences, t-test has been used. To assess relationships, Product Moment Method of correlation has been used.

### GENDER DIFFERENCES

Following table reflects the average, variability, in both girls and boys for expressive writing and spellings performance. It also shows t-ratio to indicate significance of gender differences in both expressive writing and spellings.

This table shows that mean score on expressive writing is higher among girls with higher variability. The mean score on spellings is also higher among girls but the variability is slightly lower as compared to boys.

The gender difference in mean score in expressive writing is significant as shown in table ( $t=40.38$ ,  $p<.01$  with  $df$  of 178). This difference is in favor of girls. This finding is corroborated by findings from other research studies (Swan, 1992; Denton and West, 2002; Bannon, 2004; Hanna, 2005; Mead, 2006; Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman and Raskind, 2008; Kaur, 2014). However, another study (Gurpreet, 2013) does not support

present findings. When details were examined, the sample from the latter (though small) was taken only from one school, where children belong to educated families and extremely caring environments. The scoring has been different also, it counted word points, sentence points and compound sentence points whereas in this part of present study, scoring has been with the help of Developmental Sentence Scoring Key (Lee, 1974). When means were examined, girls do score higher in Gurpreet's study but not significantly. Probably more data in that study would throw more light on this issue.

In case of spellings also, the mean score in case of girls is significantly higher as compared to boys ( $t=12.4$ ;  $p<.01$  with  $df$  of 178). Earlier researches lend support to this finding also (Daisy, 2000; Martin and Hoover, 1987; Allerd, 1990). These findings confirm hypothesis no. 1 of this study.

**Table 1**  
**Mean, S.D., t-ratio, Degrees of Freedom, p value in Expressive Writing and Spellings**

	Mean		Standard Deviation		t - ratio	Degrees of Freedom	p value
Expressive Writing	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	40.38	178	.01
	34.67	46.38	15.84	21.12			
Spellings	27.56	28.8	7.32	7.02	12.4	178	.01

**Table 2**  
**Correlation of writing skills with speaking skills and with class performance**

<b>Correlations In</b>	<b>Value of r</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>p value</b>
Writing skills and Speaking skills	0.67	68	.01
Writing skills and Class Performance	0.60	68	.01

### **Correlations of Writing Skills with Speaking Skills and with Class Performance**

Table 2 presents values of correlations of writing skills with i) speaking skills in English among children and ii) class performance in English and their p values.

The value of correlation found in writing skills and speaking skills is significant ( $r = 0.67$ ;  $p < .01$  with a df value of 68). This result confirms hypothesis no. 2.

Present finding is corroborated by findings from studies of Dallimore, Hertenstein and Platt (2008), Catherine and Hutchison (2009), Taylor, Greenberg, Daphne and Laures (2012) and Hubert (2013). However, Gurpreet's study (2013) only partly supports present findings; a significant correlation was found by her in oral and written errors but not in oral and written word points and sentence points. Once again this study needs revalidation because of small number of subjects. Puranik and AlOtaiba's study did not find significant contribution of oral skills to written expression. This experimental

study's sample was taken from kindergarten class. As the children grow, nature of various aspects of language keeps on attaining more stability. Their measures of writing were also different: handwriting and total number of words. Nature of oral skills examined in study conducted by Puranik and AlOtaiba have not been explicitly stated. Moreover, oral skills of kindergarten children are not as well developed as those of VII grade subjects of this study. Methodology and sample differences could have lead to inconsistency in findings from the two studies.

The correlation in writing skills and class performance has been found to be significant ( $r = 0.60$ ;  $p < .01$  with a df value of 68). This finding gets support from earlier researches (Harrison, 2009; Prat-Sala and Redford, 2012; Kingir, Geban and Gunel, 2012). This finding confirms hypothesis no. 3. It is too natural to expect such a relationship given our system of education and written evaluations in every field of endeavour and at every level. Oral evaluation and evaluation by doing find little scope in evaluation in Indian schools.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Children start developing language by listening to words spoken by others during early years. Oral skills in life develop before commencement of development of writing skills. This applies to languages other than mother tongue also. The process and sequence remain the same. Also, when children join school, where they are required to do serious writing, they have, by and large, already acquired reasonably good skills in speaking. Whenever, there is a need to write, human brain sends instructions for the same. Quality of an instruction issued to write will depend on quality and richness of acquired oral language which has to get translated into written form. This applies to situations where children do not have to write on topics crammed by them. The chosen topics for both writing and speaking in this study have been familiar to children. They have heard about those topics in their environments. The situation required natural attempt, recalling at best, but no cramming. That implies that the correlations obtained in the study indicate natural and real relationship.

The results of this study appear to be very interesting and encouraging for students. The findings suggest that an intervention in the oral skills of the students, who are poor in writing skills, can firstly bring a positive change in oral skills and secondly a concomitant improvement in their writing performance. The

latter can induce an improvement in class performance since it is based on writing skills in most of the evaluative situations in class room. Hence, oral skills may have the potential of benefiting in multiple ways. Findings from co relational studies offer immense benefit in planning experimental studies.

This suggests an implication to school teacher and parent that oral skills bear one of important keys to class performance. This study has implications for researchers in the area of language development. An experimental study to this effect will throw light on this. Play time which is so naturally available to children can be utilised for oral skills. Attempt can be made to study inculcation of oral skills via play way method, story method and/or other natural methods since 'Reading and writing float on a sea of talk' according to Britton (1983). If the study is longitudinal, one can examine whether administration of intervention develops better writing and class performance later in comparison to those who were not. If there are any intervening variables, between intervention in oral skills and resultant change in class performance, those can also be identified and examined. This study has also prepared ground for experimental study to know whether boys and girls respond to and utilize intervention in oral skills differently. Do they require intervention of different durations for benefits to accrue? Another question worth

examining is whether children of different age groups, as have been taken in this study, will learn and respond to intervention in speaking skills differently.

Alternatively, simultaneous intervention in written and oral skills may bring improvement in both of

these skills and ultimately also in class performance.

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