Development of foreign language writing competence: Influence of the topic on the quality of the written product

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Project goals

- Develop an instrument that can help Dutch FL teachers to
  - assess FL English and Spanish writing products in qualitative and quantitative terms
  - measure development in writing skill
- Learn more about how FL students compose their writing both in first versions and in revisions

Theoretical background

- Communicative competence in writing
- Grammatical competence
- Discourse competence
- Sociolinguistic competence
- Strategic competence
- Influence of the topic

Theoretical background

- Learner corpora
- Categories (Polio 2001)
- Assessing development
  - Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998)
  - Neff et al. (1998)
  - Grant & Ginther (2000)
  - Ortega (2003)
  - de Haan & van Esch (2005)

Activities

- Collecting essays
  - 2002
  - 2003
  - 2004
  - 2005
  - 2006
  - …
- Qualitative and quantitative study of corpus data

Data collection

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Prompt for essays

Students in cohorts 1 and 3 wrote about their preferred source of news, giving specific reasons to support their preference.

Students in cohorts 2, 4, and 5 wrote about the influence of advertising on present-day society, providing arguments in support of any claims they made.

Both prompts were taken from the TWE.

Time allowed for either: 30 minutes max.

Procedures

- Quantitative analysis of text features
  - mean essay length
  - mean sentence length
  - mean word length
  - Type/token ratio
- Characterisation of argument structure and text organisation in a small sample

Research questions

- Can we observe any differences in the four different batches of essays with respect to the four text features that we have distinguished?
- Do any of these differences point unambiguously to a difference in quality?
- A difference related to the topic?
- Can we observe any differences with respect to text organisation or argument structure?

Data used

Total # English essays: 167
- # cohort 2 essays used: 48 (= 2 * 24)
- # cohort 3 essays used: 44 (= 2 * 22)
- total # essays used: 92

Total # Spanish essays: 47
- # cohort 2 essays used: 10 (= 2 * 5)
- # cohort 3 essays used: 16 (= 2 * 8)
- total # essays used: 26

Essay Length English

Essay Length Spanish
Conclusions

1. Quantitative measures do not point unambiguously to differences in the quality of the writing products induced by these two topics.
2. Text organisation and type of argumentation do appear to reflect the different topics to some extent in the Spanish essays.
3. Certain differences in vocabulary can be related to different type of argumentation.

References


Recommendations

1. Study more cohorts of students to eliminate a possible effect due to specific cohort.
2. Make future cohort(s) write about a third topic (any suggestions?)