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

Activities

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

Data collection
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.

Procedure

- 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

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

Recommendations

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

References