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## 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

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## Theoretical background

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

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## 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)

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## Activities

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

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## Data collection

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Cohort 1	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3				
Cohort 2		Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3			
Cohort 3			Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3		
Cohort 4				Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	
Cohort 5					Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3

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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.

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## 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

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## 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?

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## Data used

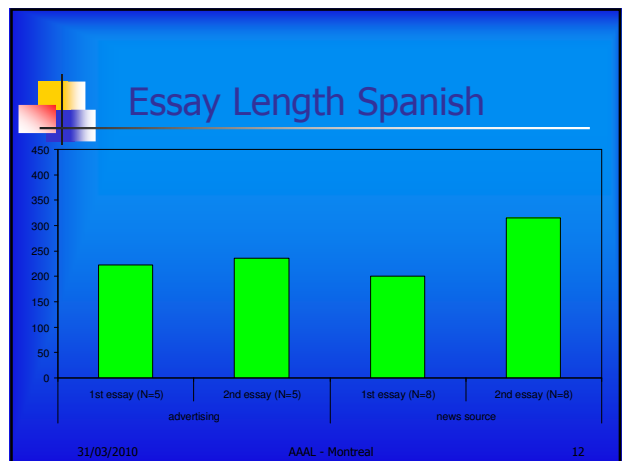
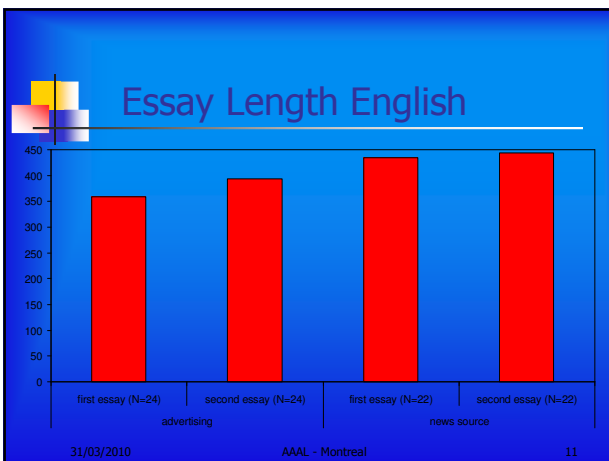
Total # English essays: 167

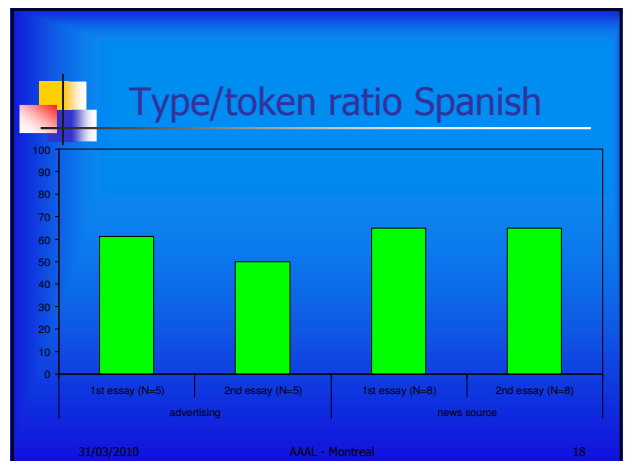
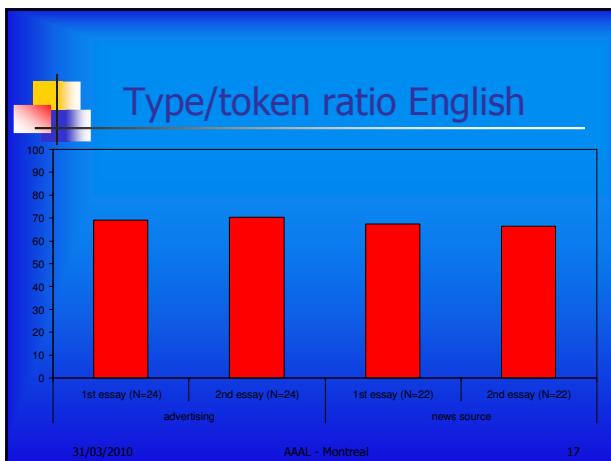
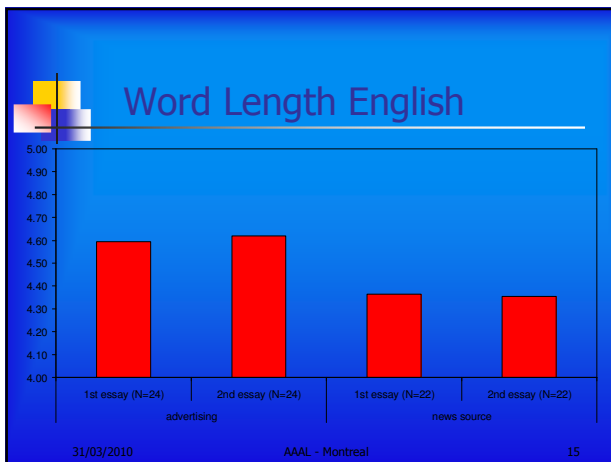
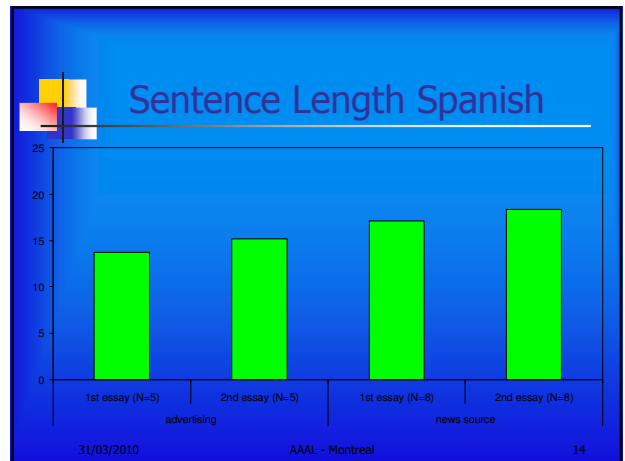
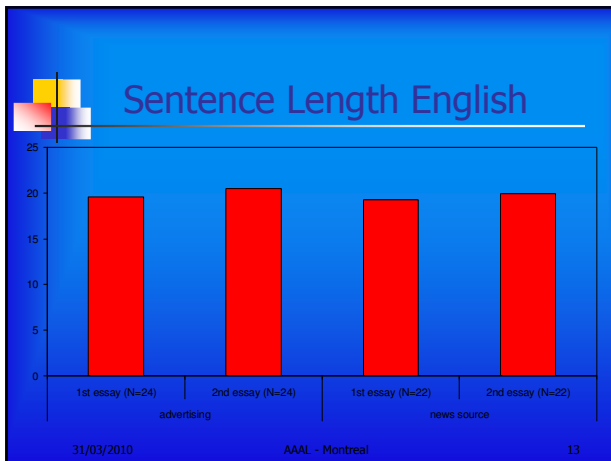
- # cohort 2 essays used: 48 (= 2 \* 24)
- # cohort 3 essays used: 44 (= 2 \* 22)
- total # essays used: 92

Total # Spanish essays: 47

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

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## 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

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## 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?)

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