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The effectiveness of intercultural comparison tasks in written discourse development: An empirical research

The paper aims at investigating the effectiveness of writing intercultural comparative essays during content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classes. This study briefly reviews the recent research into the written discourse competence development and examines if and how these results can be mirrored in currently applied second language teaching. Highlighting the prominence of intercultural comparison tasks in acquiring discourse competence and drawing largely from the questionnaire-based study, the author proposes suggestions for the written discourse improvement more fully addressing the task- and student-related dimensions of foreign language learning techniques.

Keywords: written discourse competence, intercultural comparison, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), second language writing, discourse coherence and cohesion

Skuteczność porównań interkulturowych w rozwoju kompetencji w zakresie dyskursu piśmennego: badanie empiryczne

Artykuł ma na celu zbadanie efektywności zadań pisemnych opartych na porównaniach interkulturowych podczas zintegrowanego kształcenia przedmiotowo-językowego (*content and language integrated learning* – CLIL). W tekście dokonano krótkiego przeglądu najnowszych badań nad rozwojem kompetencji w zakresie dyskursu pisemnego i zbadano, czy i w jaki sposób wyniki te mogą znaleźć odzwierciedlenie w obecnie stosowanym nauczaniu języka obcego. Podkreślając znaczenie zadań opartych na porównaniach interkulturowych w nabywaniu kompetencji dyskursywnej i czerpiąc w dużej mierze z badań ankietowych, autorka przedstawia metody doskonalenia kompetencji związanej z dyskursem pisemnym, które w większym stopniu uwzględniają zadaniowy i uczniowski wymiar technik uczenia się języków obcych.

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Słowa kluczowe: kompetencja w zakresie dyskursu pisemnego, porównanie międzykulturowe, zintegrowane nauczanie przedmiotowo-językowe (*content and language integrated learning* – CLIL), sprawność pisania w języku obcym, kohezja i koherencja dyskursu

Zur Effektivität interkultureller Vergleiche bei der diskursiven Kompetenzentwicklung in schriftlichen Aufgaben: Eine empirische Untersuchung

Das Ziel des Beitrags ist es, die Effektivität von schriftlichen, auf interkulturellen Vergleichen aufbauenden Aufgaben im Rahmen des inhalts- und sprachintegrierten Unterrichts (CLIL) zu untersuchen. In der Studie wird ein kurzer Überblick über die aktuelle Forschung zur Entwicklung der schriftlichen Diskurskompetenz gegeben und der Frage nachgegangen, ob und wie die dargestellten Analyseergebnisse im Fremdsprachenunterricht von heute umgesetzt werden können. In der überwiegend auf Fragebögen-Analysen gestützten Arbeit stellt die Autorin die Relevanz der auf interkulturellen Vergleichen aufbauenden Aufgaben für den Erwerb der diskursiven Kompetenz heraus und zeigt Methoden zur Entwicklung der schriftlichen Diskurskompetenz, in denen die aufgaben- und schülerbezogenen Dimensionen von Fremdsprachenlern Techniken umfassender berücksichtigt werden.

Schlüsselwörter: schriftliche Diskurskompetenz, interkultureller Vergleich, inhalts- und sprachintegriertes Lernen (CLIL), Schreiben in der Zweitsprache, Diskurskohärenz und -kohäsio

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s discourse competence has been analysed and classified by many applied linguists and socio-linguists (e.g. Canale and Swain 1980; Iragui 2004; Belmonte 2004). Researchers unanimously define it as an aspect of communicative skills accompanied by grammatical, socio-linguistic, and strategic abilities. Thus, discourse competence may be described as the organisation of sentences in sequence to create logical stretches of language. As cogently argued by Trujillo et al. (1993:5), it requires not only knowledge but also the ability to order sentences in terms of topic/focus, given/new, natural sequencing, cause/effect, ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of thematic organisation, coherence and cohesion, logical ordering, style and register, rhetorical effectiveness, the ‘co-operative principle’, text design, that is the knowledge of the design conventions in the community concerning how information is structured in realising the various macro functions (description, narrative, exposition), how stories, anecdotes, jokes, etc. are told, how a case is built up (in law, debate, etc.), how written texts (essays, formal letters, etc.) are laid out, signposted, and sequenced. In the light of the above, discourse competence may be defined as the ability to comprehend, construct and develop forms of the language. These forms should be longer than a sentence and in accordance with the established structure, logic, and rhetorical organisation in order to combine concepts.

An important implication for didactics emerging from this point of view is the significance of teaching specific discourse genres through their presentation, analysis, and creation, especially during teaching and learning of content subjects in a foreign language classes. It is not only a way to extend and enhance the input that learners receive, but also a method that places students in a context in which the use of a foreign language for communication is essential to reach immediate goals. What Wilczyńska (2013:134) adds to this point is that personal communication is crucial to the analysis of discourse competence. It is defined by the author as a set of individual skills adapted to the objectives, conditions, and type of actions taken by a person. These competencies exist within a learner's general attitudes/preferences and thus are shaped by his/her system of values. Each of a student's competencies, including discourse skills, is always personal. In other words, it is realised only in his/her mind, and thus is related to the overall functioning of a given person: self-development plans, psychophysical potential, self-perception, sensitivity and even identity. As a result, the most effective didactic activities are those that employ not only task-related but also student-related factors and promote the autonomy of the student to a greater or lesser extent.

This line of thought is followed in the present article. The author examines the written discourse competence of students during content-based English language lessons and intends to shed some light on the question of the effectiveness of intercultural comparison writing assignments, task aspects and students' features in terms of written discourse competence development in the content-based teaching and learning environment.

2. Written discourse competence in CLIL classes

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is connected to the content-based subject teaching through the foreign language in the classroom. In this method an additional linguistic system is used for "the teaching and learning of subjects with a dual focus on language and content" (Heras and Lasagabaster 2015:71). Given that, CLIL is perceived as an alternative to conventional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching method. As it is proven by many researchers, by focusing on meaning and communication, CLIL helps in implicit and incidental learning. Thus, it results in overall foreign language proficiency improvement (Lasagabaster 2008; Heras and Lasagabaster 2015; Coyle 2008; Coyle et al. 2010).

The CLIL approach has led to numerous research studies on many educational levels, ranging from children aged 5–6 (Llinares 2007) to teacher training courses (Escobar and Pérez-Vidal 2004; Coyle 2007). Yet, a surge in the field of CLIL

has revealed that even though a fair amount of arguments have been presented in support of using content-based subject teaching in the classroom environment in terms of interaction and language production (Dalton-Puffer and Smit 2007:329; McCabe 2011:486), there is still a gap in the studies on the written competence of CLIL students.

What the literature offers is the study conducted by Lasagabaster (2008:31–34) and Ruiz de Zarobe (2010:191–209), who demonstrate that CLIL students, when compared to their older pupils from EFL classes, have better developed writing skills¹ in general topic assignments. Nevertheless, there has not been much recently published on discipline-specific writing skills. What is accessible, is cross-sectional research conducted by Llinares, Whittaker (2006:28-30) and Coetze-Lachman (2009:240-242) proving that the early secondary CLIL students are not able to produce the register of the discipline in their writings. In fact, as argued by many linguists (Cope and Kalantzis 1993; Halliday and Martin 1993; Hasan and Williams 1996; Christie and Martin 1997; Martin and Veel 1998; Unsworth 2000; Whittaker et al. 2006), the majority of the students has problems with comprehending and contributing to the disciplines genres and registers at the secondary level. By analysing various subject areas in the first and second language, Schleppegrell (2004:134–138), Coffin (2006:413–429) and Matthiessen (2009:224) have revealed developmental paths connecting cognitive and linguistic demands. According to the authors, those links begin at the primary level of education and go through until reaching the pre-university level. Matthiessen (2009:224–229) provides even greater clarity towards understanding this premise by identifying the key moments in language learning; specifically, “an early mastery of writing as a mode and, the transition into the registers of uncommonsense, disciplinary knowledge which takes place when pupils start their secondary education” (ibid.). CLIL students encounter the same cognitive challenges while working with their subjects genres and, from the perspective of a process and problem-solving attitude toward writing, their additional struggle to find a proper form in the foreign language may lead to deeper semantic processing (Heine 2010: 1423–1428).

When attempting to describe the concept of CLIL, it is important to note that writing is the most common method of recording students’ knowledge for assessment. Thus, one of the objectives of CLIL is to write coherent and cohesive texts. In the next section, the author shall briefly address the most salient aspects of these elements of discourse.

¹ The assessment was based on the measures indicative of writing quality proposed by Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998:187).

3. Discourse cohesion and coherence

Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995:30–35) affirm the centrality of cohesion and coherence in the effectively organised and meaningful discourse. While cohesion is defined as the use of linking expressions (e.g. conjunctions, adverbial phrases) to link ideas, coherence refers to the way a text establishes connections in meaning within and between sentences.

As Halliday and Hasan (1976:23–24) go on to explain, the text “is coherent with respect to the context of situation and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive”. Coherence consists of both appropriateness to register – a writer must create the discourse type and contextually appropriate reference which is expected by a reader in a given situational context, and cohesion – thanks to which a network of contextually recoverable reference is created. The creation of a cohesive discourse is highly dependent on so-called cohesive ties, such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, discourse markers, and lexical cohesion. Since cohesion “refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text” (Halliday and Hasan 1976:4), one may assume that it can be also classified as a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other element essential to the interpretation of it. Turning to discourse coherence, it is the semantic relationship between propositions or communicative events in discourse. In other words, coherence links the meanings of sentences in a discourse (Richards et al. 1993:61).

Overall, a review of the research on discourse cohesion and coherence discloses that information management, comparison of concepts, differentiation between the already possessed knowledge and the newly acquired information is the key element in writing texts that not only are cohesive with their co-text and context but also allow readers to create a coherent model of their content. In the following section, the intercultural comparative rhetorical essays will be proposed as a way to practise the construction of cohesive and coherent discourse during content-based language teaching.

4. Culture and discourse: contrastive rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric critically investigates the cultural and linguistic differences involved in structuring texts and therefore, it is an example of the diversity study in discourse. Even though contrastive rhetoric has been changing during the past 40 years, its fundamental principle described by Kaplan (1966:1) is still applicable:

Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word) which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture.

Contrastive rhetoric is based on the comparison of two written texts from two various communities. Differences and similarities of both are analysed and then interpreted in search of any historical, social, educational or any other plausible justification. The final step is to provide suggestions to address diversity at the level of discourse (Kuziak and Rzepczyński 2004:37; Majewska 2014:40; Jaroszek 2008:8). Majewska 2013:349) proposes two forms of comparison of texts, which are as follows:

1. introduction – comparison criterion A – criterion B – criterion X – summary – conclusions;
2. introduction – description of phenomenon A – description of phenomenon B – summary (according to comparison criteria listed most often in the summary) – conclusions.

Further, Loranc-Paszylk (2009:125) demonstrates the efficiency of contrastive rhetoric writing during CLIL classes. The author lists many advantages of choosing the format of a comparison essay, such as universal form (independent of a non-language subject), topic choice, opportunity to gain new knowledge, limited possibilities of plagiarism, the exposition text format². Additionally, it is an effective form of writing for students who face the challenge of comparing concepts or already possessed knowledge with the newly acquired information. Thus, in what follows, the writing discourse competence improvement among CLIL students is examined through a systematic practise of intercultural comparative essays. This part provides also answers to the crucial question connected to this method: which student- and task-related aspects foster the progress of written discourse skills?

5. The current study

The study represents a snapshot of writing development in CLIL English language classes. The corpus analysed was collected from 36 students aged between 19–22. The second language (English) proficiency of the participants was assessed at the B2 level. The data collected come from a number of tasks. During

² As a point of fact, it is considered by researchers to be the most difficult due to organizational requirements.

the academic year, students wrote four written comparisons on their practical English classes. Table 1 presents the details of the topics and data collected. The average text length was indicated to make readers aware of the type of texts the study is based on.

	October 2019: Differences between cultures	December 2020: Educational systems	March 2020: Transnational issues	June 2020: The impact of the coronavirus on the economy and education
Total number of words	9,928	5,664	9,730	7,424
Average number of words per text	292	236	278	256

Table 1. Data collection.

The research was guided by the following questions:

- Research Question 1: How has discourse competence evolved with the use of intercultural comparison assignments in a CLIL classroom?
- Research Question 2: What task-related factors have contributed to the development of discourse skills?
- Research Question 3: What student-related aspects have influenced improvements in discourse competence?

Based on the previously discussed studies and the research questions, the following hypotheses are presented:

- Hypothesis 1: Intercultural comparison writing tasks are beneficial for foreign language learners' written discourse development
- Hypothesis 2: The results obtained from the questionnaire-based survey reveal student- and task-related aspects that influence written discourse development

For each of the comparison of texts specific criteria for assessment were established (after: Majewska 2013:379–380):

- Criterion 1: The length of the text is within the word limit.
- Criterion 2: The text is coherent and does not contain unnecessary components.
- Criterion 3: The text is coherent as per the structure typical for comparison writing tasks. It contains a logical and graphical division into paragraphs: introduction, main body with similarities and differences, and summary. The

main body is structured according to one of three possible variants: each paragraph contains various criteria of comparison; differences and similarities are presented in two separate sections; the main body consists of a description of the two phenomena and a summary of the dissimilarities and parallels is included in the final paragraph according to the comparison criteria.

- Criterion 4: The text is characterised by the correct use of comparison discourse markers in the scope of the micro- and macro- text and/or other linguistic devices expressing comparison, especially at the semantic level (e.g. ‘similarly’, ‘comparable’, ‘in the same way’, ‘on the other hand’, ‘contrary’).
- Criterion 5: The text does not contain obvious stylistic (e.g. in register) or logical (e.g. incomprehensible fragments, ambiguous mental shortcuts) errors. Global grammatical and lexical errors that make the text incomprehensible are not present.

The internal development was assessed based on self-reported data (students’ diary reports) and reflection from contributors. Students were also asked to assess their texts and their own development through online questionnaires. Each assignment was followed by direct interviews as well as teacher assessments based on the aforementioned set of criteria.

6. Written discourse development: Results of the analysis

The first part of this section reveals the results obtained from the teacher-assessed writing of the students based on five criteria mentioned above (see: Figure 1). Drawing from the data collected, it is evident that the participants in this study experienced a significant increase in all four evaluation bands. Overall, among 36 students, criterion 1, that is the ability to write within the word limit, gained the highest value of improvement (40%). Criterion 2 (coherence) and criterion 5 (stylistic, logical and grammatical correctness) were the second most improved skills among students (18% and 17%). The use of discourse markers (criterion 4) was improved by 13%. A relatively small number of students developed their skill of properly structuring the writing content (criterion 3), which gained only 3%. Yet, it is important to highlight that this ability was highly assessed (76%) at the beginning of the study in October 2019, which suggests that students did not encounter problems with a proper outlay of their essays (to compare: criterion 1 gained 48%, criterion 2 – 57%, criterion 4 – 61%, and criterion 5 – 45%). The average value of improvement in writing discourse competence was 18%.

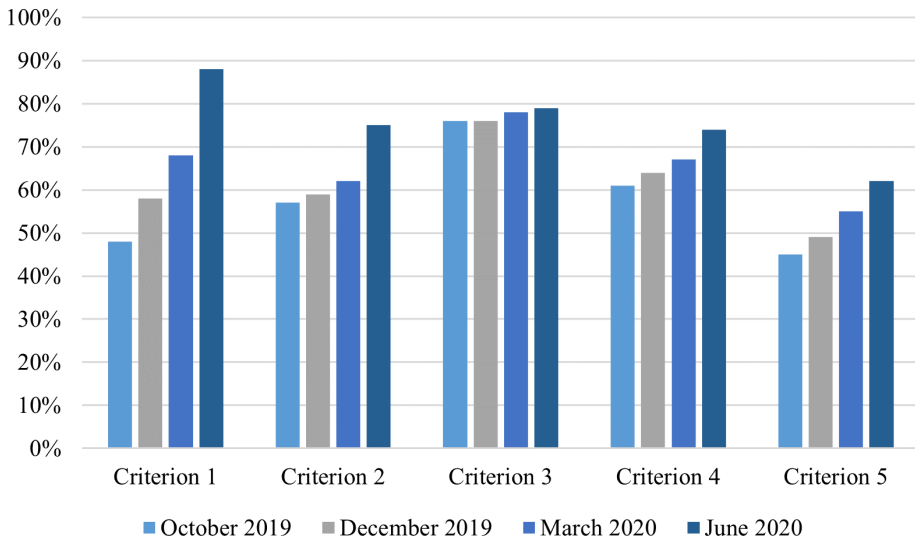


Figure 1. Writing discourse competence development (assessed by the teacher).

The questionnaire-based survey demonstrated the existence of task-related factors that influenced the development of discourse skills. Systematic practice throughout the academic year (tasks were assigned every three months) was the most valued aspect in terms of discourse competence development (22%). Practising possible structures, critical thinking, and source choice during classes at the group level was the second most frequent factor given (21%). Respondents listed constant evaluation and individual feedback on discourse provided by the teacher (19%) as the third factor affecting discourse competence improvement. There were 14% of all students who chose self-assessment as the best tool to develop their writing skills. The analysis of participants' responses has revealed that self-reliance³ (10%), the novelty of the topics (8%), and the possibility of topic choice (6%) were perceived as the least beneficial factors in terms of discourse competence progress.

The adept use of discourse skills by the studied group was also influenced by the individual features of each learner. According to the students, the ability of self-evaluation (21%), independence (20%), critical thinking (16%), and readiness to face new challenges (15%) were of central importance for the development of discourse skill. Other character traits listed by the respondents include discipline (10%), attention to details (7%), clarity (6%), passion for reading (3%), creativity (2%).

³ Self-reliance was affected by the inaccessibility of ready materials that can be found online. Thus, the task posed a challenge for many students.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The study has examined students' progress in their written discourse competence during intercultural comparative essays writing, with a specific focus on the task- and student-related features. Giving the answer to the first three questions, one of the main findings is that a significant development of discourse skills among the students was observed. The discourse competence improved with the use of intercultural comparison assignments by an average of 18%. Students not only felt more confident in writing a comparison of texts within the word limit, but they were also able to create more coherent, stylistically, logically and grammatically correct output with the use of discourse markers. In the same vein, the research has presented many developmental patterns in the growth of writing discourse competence and identified possible factors determining it. Systematic practice, preparation at the group level, teacher's feedback, and self-evaluation received most of the participants' votes. The findings of the research have also demonstrated four core student-related aspects that have influenced the development of discourse competence among the students; namely, the ability of self-assessment, critical thinking (crucial for the critical choice of comparison sources), and willingness to accept new challenges. This enables to combine the above-mentioned aspects and create a more effective use of the intercultural comparative essays, which meets the students' needs and takes into account students' answers to the survey-based questionnaire.

All of the above confirms that writing in a foreign language is a skill that requires time, consistency and extensive practice. The proposed method on the one hand takes into consideration the research findings on discourse competence and, on the other, attempts to combine student- and task-related factors to provide foreign language learners with a convenient opportunity to improve their written discourse skill.

Intercultural comparison essays lead to the development of critical thinking, higher-order thinking, and self-reliance of the student. All these skills and competencies are crucial in bilingual education and content-based English teaching. Research also confirms that systematic assignments based on the students' autonomy have an influence on his/her personal communication development. Thus, it is recommended that teachers do not neglect intercultural comparative essays in the process of foreign language teaching and more fully address the task- and student-related dimensions of written discourse competence practice.

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