

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTUAL COMPETENCE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, AND IN BULGARIAN

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Abstract. This article aims to present a comparative analysis of the textual competence of Bulgarian students in English as a foreign language, and in Bulgarian. The corpus includes narrative and argumentative essays in English and Bulgarian, on the basis of which the tested persons' skills in both languages are assessed. The texts are analyzed against criteria such as text structure, macrostructure and cohesion. Attention is paid to language facts such as vocabulary/lexis, grammar, phraseology and syntactic structures.

Keywords: comparative study, textual competence, narrative competence, text structure, cohesion

1. Introduction

The analysis is based on Boueke's model (1995) of the global structure of the narrative text, and on the study of Halliday & Hasan (1976) of cohesion.

In Boueke's model a narrative text has a global structure if it consists of an introduction, body, element of suspense/break (German: Bruch) expressed most often through the adverbs "suddenly", "unexpectedly", etc., and a conclusion.

Before the model is presented, we should explain what is understood under a "story" in this article. For Boueke et al. (1995) a story is a specific type of narrative text which has a characteristic structure. A text can be defined as a story if:

1. all the actions important for the event are present in it;
2. the actions are organized in a linear sequence as a coherent structure;
3. the text contains an element of suspense (cf. Schülein et al. 1995: 244, Brewer & Lichtenstein 1980: 11).

Consequently, a story is a narrative in which information about an event is organized in a structure in such a way as to produce suspense.

Texts produced by children and adults with well-developed narrative skills clearly demonstrate a marked affect structure of the story which includes:

1. valence (German: Valenz), i.e. emotionally marked lexemes, mainly adjectives;
2. psychological closeness achieved through direct and indirect speech;
3. suddenness (German: Plötzlichkeit) which creates surprise, and introduces the element of suspense. Usually it is expressed through the following adverbials: “suddenly”, “unexpectedly”, “all of a sudden”, or it could be implicit

As mentioned above, the analysis is also based on Halliday & Hasan’s (1976) study of cohesion, as cohesion is a necessary condition for text coherence. Cohesion is what distinguishes text from nontext by interrelating linguistic elements across sentences.

Halliday and Hasan view the text as a unit of language in use and not as a grammatical unit, like a clause or a sentence. “Cohesion is a semantic concept and it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text”. (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 4).

So cohesion helps to create text by providing texture. According to Halliday & Hasan (1976) the cohesive relationships between and within the sentences which create texture are the most important factor determining whether a set of sentences constitute a text or not. “A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text...” (ibid: 2). The function of cohesion is to relate one part of a text to another part of the same text. Consequently, it lends continuity to the text. Cohesive relationships within a text are set up “where the INTERPRETATION of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it” (ibid: 4).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that cohesion is expressed partly through the grammar and partly through the vocabulary, hence grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion are equally important for building up texture. “Cohesion is a semantic relation. But, like all the components of the semantic system, it is realized through the lexicogrammatical system...” (ibid: 5). The lexicogrammatical system includes both grammar and vocabulary. Reference, substitution and ellipsis refer to grammatical cohesion, lexical cohesion includes reiteration and collocation, while conjunction stands on the borderline between the two categories. In other words, it is mainly grammatical but sometimes involves a lexical component in it.

Substitution operates as a linguistic link on the lexicogrammatical level. “Substitution is a relation between linguistic items, such as words or phrases, whereas reference is a relation between meanings.” (ibid: 89). Ellipsis and substitution are very similar to each other. Ellipsis is simply ‘substitution by zero’. Substitution is the replacement of one item by another and ellipsis is the omission of the item. We will elaborate on the authors’ classification of different cohesion types and their linguistic realization below to provide the framework against which the textual competence of students in using appropriate cohesive types is measured.

Halliday & Hasan (1976) examine several types of referencing: situational or exophoric referencing, which refers to information that can be retrieved from the situation, and endophoric referencing, which refers to information that can be retrieved from within the text. Endophoric referencing, which is the focus of the cohesion theory, can be divided into anaphoric and cataphoric. Anaphoric refers to any reference that “points backwards” to previously mentioned information in the text. Cataphoric refers to any reference that “points forward” to information that will be presented later in the text. Only the anaphoric type of reference bears relevance to cohesion, as it “provides a link with a preceding portion of the text” (ibid: 51).

Lexical cohesion is different from the other cohesive relations in a text since it is non-grammatical. Lexical cohesion refers to the “cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary” (ibid: 274). Lexical cohesion occurs when two words in a text are related in terms of their meaning. Reiteration and collocation are the two major types of lexical cohesion. Reiteration includes repetition of a lexical item, the use of a synonym or near-synonym, a superordinate or a general word. Collocation pertains to lexical items that are likely to be found together within the same text. “The cohesive effect of such pairs depends not so much on any systematic semantic relationship as on their tendency to share the same lexical environment” (ibid: 286).

Conjunction acts as a semantic cohesive tie between clauses or sections of text. Conjunction differs from the other cohesive relations. Substitution operates as a linguistic link at the lexicogrammatical level, reference is a semantic relation between meanings rather than between linguistic forms, while conjunctive elements “are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings; they are not primary devices for reaching out into the preceding (or following) text, but they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse.” (ibid: 227)

Halliday & Hasan (1976) adopt a scheme of four categories of conjunctive relations: additive, adversative, causal and temporal. Additive conjunction coordinates or provides a link by adding to the presupposed item. Some additive conjunctions are “and”, “and also”, “furthermore”, “additionally”, etc. Additive conjunction may also negate the presupposed item and is signalled by “nor”, “and...not”, “either”, “neither”, etc. Adversative conjunctions act to indicate “contrary to expectation” (ibid: 250) and are signaled by “yet”, “though”, “only”, “but”, “however”, “nevertheless”, “in fact”, “rather”, “on the other hand”, etc. Causal conjunction expresses “result, reason and purpose” and is signaled by “so”, “then”, “hence”, “therefore”, “for”, “because”, “for this reason”, “on account of this”, “as a result”, “in this respect”, etc.”. The temporal conjunctive relations provide cohesive links by signaling sequence or time. Some temporal conjunctive signals are “then”, “next”, “after that”, “at the same time”, “at this point”, “previously”, “first”, “finally”, “to sum up”, etc.

On the grounds of the above mentioned theoretical research, we could say that a coherent text demonstrates the characteristics of a formal global structure, has lexical and grammatical cohesion, and makes use of the appropriate cohesive devices to ensure it.

2. Experiment

The experiment is part of project “*Study of students’ discourse competence in the production of narrative and argumentative essays in a foreign language (English/German) and in their native language*”. Second year English Philology students at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” participated in the experiment, which was conducted within two consecutive weeks. The first week the students had to write two essays in English each, and the following week they had to write two essays in Bulgarian.

The students were shown a short silent film, approximately 3,5 minutes, describing everyday situations at school and in students’ spare time, such as cheating in tests, acts of aggression, stealing, ignoring classmates, i.e. situations involving problems or interpersonal conflicts. After the end of the film the students were given the following instructions for the first essay: “Please describe such or a similar event that has happened to you, your friends, relatives or acquaintances”. The participants in the experiment had approximately 40 minutes to write their essays.

After the completion of this task, based on the same film, the students were given the assignment to write an essay on the topic whether any type of behaviour shown in the film is right or wrong, and to present arguments supporting their theses. The time for this task was also approximately 40 minutes.

The experiment was repeated the following week. The students were shown the same film again and were given the same assignments, but this time they had to write essays in Bulgarian.

3. Analysis

62 students (45 women and 17 men, average age 20) wrote essays in English.

Essays in English	Narrative essays	Argumentative essays
N of texts	62	62
N of words	16951	14316
Average length of the text	273,4	231
N of sentences	957	774
Average length of the sentences	17,7 words	18,5 words
Simple sentences	180	150
Complex sentences	777	624

The analysis shows the following:

Narrative essays

The average number of words is 273.

In 22 essays there are no specific events described. In them the students write about cheating, bullying, fighting or what it feels to be an outsider, in general.

Only in 9 of the remaining 40 essays the element of suspense is present. In 6 of these essays it is expressed through the adverb “suddenly”, while in the other 3 it is implicit: “... He approached them beaming. To his shock all of them just left without a word”, “One day as usual, we had to meet.....But when I went there the girls just looked at me for a while and then turned round, and”, “ I was not looking where I was going..... A moment later I found my face kissing the wall, and...”. In 4 essays the students use direct or indirect speech, which creates the sense of psychological closeness with the reader.

These 9 essays (15%) have global structure consisting of an introduction, body, element of suspense and a conclusion.

The prevalent sentences in the writings are complex – 777 out of a total of 957 sentences. The most common cohesive links are “and”, “but”, “when”, “that”, “which”, “while”, “because”.

The students use “however”, “nevertheless”, “nonetheless”, “moreover”, “rather than” less often.

Argumentative essays

The average length of the text is 231 words.

Most of the sentences in the essays are complex – 624 out of 774 sentences. The most common cohesive links are “and”, “but”, “when”, “that”, “which”, “while”, “because”, “although”, “therefore”.

The students use “first”, “second”, “what is more”, “last but not least”, “on the one hand”, “on the other hand”, “in conclusion”, which are the main cohesive devices between paragraphs in a text, less often.

One of the essays is not argumentative but descriptive. Four essays do not have clearly formulated theses, while 23 essays lack sufficient arguments and convincing examples. The main reason for this is the length of the texts – between 83 and 200 words.

Only 21 of the essays (34%) meet the criteria for this type of texts – they have an introduction, a well-focused thesis, a body consisting of several paragraphs, each beginning with a topic sentence and giving supporting details and examples, and a conclusion. These essays demonstrate a clear understanding of the topic and the task, the theses in them are developed gradually in a logical way, each paragraph develops the argument in a new aspect, adding to the previous one, and elaborating on the examples, thus contributing to the full development of the thesis.

The main problem, however, is with the text cohesion. Most of the essays manifest such problems. In some cases this is due to the lack of logical cohesive

links within and between the paragraphs, or lack of any cohesion devices between the paragraphs. These are several examples of problems with cohesion, especially anaphoric reference (“...a person should respect themselves...” You are not necessarily obliged to agree with others, but if, for instance, we are about to hurt someone....”, “...Everybody has their good and bad moments. For me personally it’s more or less even.”, “...K. usually sat on what she had prepared - little sheets of paper, and when she needed to look at it, she would....”) and substitution/ellipsis (“... the teacher will expect the student to demonstrate his skills in English in class, as he did in the exam, but he will be unable “– “*to do it.*”). In some essays these problems arise from lengthy sentences (“...When some of the boys stepped up /in/ to deffend/defend/ the accused girl, they were branded as her helpers and that they were spreading rummours/rumours/ as well” – 26 words, (apart from the problem with cohesion, there is an error in the used phrasal verb, as well as spelling mistakes), the use of inappropriate conjunctions (“.....We were thirteen girls and thirteen boys, and as the boys were always in a good relationship with one another, there was always a problem between some of the girls.”), or lack of enough cohesive devices (“.....On the other day, when the test started everything was going well in the beginning, but then suddenly I felt the teacher’s hand on my shoulder, that’s when I got caught.”).

The following passage is another example of lack of cohesion: (“ Furthermore, ignoring like this might produce even worse relationships in the future and might challenge the development of any kid, especially producing people with low self-esteem and with a lot of self-hatred unable to fulfill their role in society. Teachers should be careful and be ready to support.”) Here the problem is with referencing – the agent is not clear and the ergative construction (“ignoring like this”) is wrong. The last sentence is mechanically attached to the previous one, and it is not clear who or what the teachers should support.

Another example is the following paragraph, which is the introduction in one of the essays. The paragraph has a loose structure, there are not sufficient cohesive devices, we find lexical mistakes “variety”, “however”, as well as wrong word order. The adversative conjunction “however” is used inappropriately in this paragraph. (“Today’s world is full of a variety of people. Some of them we consider good, others bad or both. We form an opinion of them by/based on what they say or do. There are a lot of examples of bullying, cheating and stealing. However, we live in a dynamic, stressful environment such a behaviour is unforgivable. There is no excuse for those actions or offensive words. No one has the right to hurt people no matter what is the reason.”)

In general the students demonstrate a good knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of the English language, but they still make lexical mistakes (“tabloids” instead of “*broadsheets*”, “permanent suspension” instead of “*expulsion*”, “relieve” instead of “*relief*”) and grammatical mistakes. The students still have problems with collocations (“write us bad marks”, “considerably important”, “made the

exercises,” “examined verbally”, “silent whispers”, “making physical injuries”). The most common grammatical errors are: incorrect use of adjectives in place of adverbs (“...the girls looked strange at me”); literal translations from Bulgarian (“... is looked upon with bad eyes...”); wrong forms of irregular verbs, and incorrect negation (“...I did not took..” “teared lip”, “leaved the room”, “she didn’t made many friends”); using a plural verb form with a singular subject (“...I believe that this story have made them less prejudiced..”, “...the ignored kid have poor parents..”) incorrect use of tenses, including in conditional sentences (“....We had a test and I knew what was about to happen after we’ve finished it..., but I haven’t given a thought about the possibility that ...”, “.....If I find money in a wallet with an identity card or a passport, I would definitely try to return it...”, “...if she took /had made/ the effort to get to know the boy instead of victimizing him, she might have earned a friend...” / here we find wrong collocations as well/); failure to use articles or incorrect use of articles (“... there will be fights in future..”, “..right in the front of the second row”, “...we did not do it all at once but a one or a few at a time”, “...we should try to avoid getting into the trouble and teach our children...”); wrong word order (“... this time though surprised me the fact that it happened ...”, “one hardly could cheat in exams”); mistakes in emphatic structures (“Not once at some point in one’s life one becomes an object of ...”); incorrect use of phrasal verbs (“... she turned back/round/ and went inside”, “... they don’t care for their classmates’ feelings”,) incorrect use of prepositions (“.. he went through the room”, “in the end of June”, “... this would spare him some drama in home”, “good on the subject”, “at the end, when it was time to go..”, “example for”, “proud with”, “at first place”/ *in the first place*/). There are also numerous punctuation mistakes (“As we all know cheating is against the rules however, at some point of his/her life a person has cheated”).

Unattached non-finite clauses still present a problem for the students: (“...so when doing my exercises Alex kept interrupting me and wanted help.”). Actually the student wanted to write the following: “... so while I was doing my exercises, Alex kept interrupting me and wanted help”. This sentence violates the norms of English syntax, particularly the attachment rule: “When a subject is not present in a non-finite or verbless clause, the normal ATTACHMENT RULE for identifying the subject is that it is assumed to be identical in reference to the subject of the superordinate clause.” (Quirk et. al, 1985: 1121).

There are spelling mistakes in 38 of the narrative and in 15 of the argumentative essays as well (“oppinion”, “martur”, “adress”, “strenght”, “pitty”, “disapointed”, “inocent”, “ofcourse”, “occured”, “streight”, “adolecents”, “forgoten”, etc.), but as a whole they do not affect the comprehension of the texts.

Essays in Bulgarian

46 students (31 women and 15 men, average age 20) wrote essays in Bulgarian.

Essays in Bulgarian	Narrative essays	Argumentative essays
N of texts	46	46
N of words	11636	9664
Average length of the text	253	210
N of sentences	665	531
Average length of the sentences	17,5 words	18,2 words
Simple sentences	167	119
Complex sentences	498	412

The analysis shows the following:

Narrative essays

The average number of words is 253

Only 31 of the essays describe a given event. In the remaining essays there are no specific events described, the texts are either too short, they describe several events briefly, or they are more philosophical and the given events are not the focus of the essays. Only in 5 of these 31 essays (11%) the element of suspense/break is present. In 3 of them it is expressed through the adverbs “изневиделица”, “изведнъж” and “неочаквано”, and in the other 2 it is implicit. These 5 essays (11%) have global structure consisting of an introduction, body, element of suspense/break (German: Bruch) and a conclusion.

The prevalent sentences in the writings are complex – 498 out of a total of 665 sentences. The most common cohesive links are “и”, “или”, “но”, “както”, “когато”, “където”, “докато”, “въпреки”, “защото”.

Argumentative essays

The average number of words is 210.

Four essays lack a clearly defined thesis, and two are not connected with the assigned task: one of them gives an account of what the student should have done under certain circumstances, and the other one dwells on the topic of reckless driving. 23 essays do not provide adequate details or examples to support the arguments, which is due mainly to the length of the these texts – between 57 and 200 words.

The prevalent sentences in the writings are complex – 412 out of a total of 531 sentences. The most common cohesive links are: “и”, “или”, “но”, “както”, “когато”, “където”, “докато”, “въпреки”, “защото”.

Only 11 essays (24%) meet the criteria for this type of texts – they have an introduction, a well-focused thesis, a body with sufficient arguments and examples for the full development of the thesis, and a conclusion.

14 essays lack a coherent structure, and we observe cohesion problems in another 8 texts. In some cases this is due to the predominantly short simple sentences in the texts, without any meaningful links between them, while in other essays the sentences are too long, and the logical connections within the sentences are lost: („Другото,

което е от императивна важност е ефектът, който има тормоза върху съответния индивид, който извършва насилието (той всъщност не разрешава собствената си проблематика), този който бива насилен (често хора, които са били тормозени в училищна възраст проявяват по-големи признаци на социална инхибираност и ниска самооценъчност) и ефектът върху останалите ученици (този вид проява на агресия може да доведе до погрешна стереотипизация и поведение неадекватно в една по-израснала среда).”). We can infer that the writer elaborates on the effect that bullying has on the bullies, and the long-term consequences for the victims and the other students, but the loose structure disrupts the cohesion. According to Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler cohesion “concerns the ways in which the components of the SURFACE TEXT, i.e. the actual words we hear or see, are *mutually connected within a sequence*”, (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981: 3), and in this sentence the connections are lost due to the lack of cohesive devices.

The most common problem, however, both in the narrative and the argumentative essays, is the lack of cohesion within the paragraphs and the purely mechanical linking of the paragraphs into a unified text.

Some of the students use slang (“... се случи нещо, което накара тези хора да изпаднат дори повече в очите ми” “задобряхме”, “няма как да се чупиш от час”, “даскало”, “...ако ти пука за успеха..”). Based on the studies of Sieber (1998), we find transfer of register from oral communication to written text, mainly in the narrative essays. This phenomenon is defined as “Parlando”.

Only 12 of the narrative and 11 of the argumentative essays are without any mistakes. In the remaining essays we detect mistakes with collocations (“... покачена степен на стрес при детето”, “често си спогаждаме малки шегги”, “Бивайки подтискани, от съучениците си те имат ужасно ниско поведение за себе си и това оставя трайно петно в поведението им.”). The texts are full of spelling mistakes (“струполи”, “оранготани”, “лапета”, “усъдили” “убиждаше” “чуства”, “в предвид..”). Most students do not have basic knowledge of the punctuation rules, mainly the use of the comma before subordinate conjunctions such as “ако”, “за да”, “въпреки че”, “тъй като”, etc., or the rules for the use of the article “пълнен” and “непълнен член”. There are 50 mistakes in the use of the article in the corpus of 92 essays containing 21300 words: (“И така, когато деня на теста дойде...” “Във въпросният клас имаше едно момиче...”, “Принципно винаги се очаква да има разногласия и караници когато има толкова много пубертета във една стая, но моя клас беше различен”). In general this does not pose an obstacle to the comprehension of the texts but is a clear indication of lack of adequate Bulgarian language competence.

4. Conclusion

As a whole, the textual competences of the students in English as a foreign language, and in Bulgarian as their native language are comparable. The main problems in a large number of the essays are connected with the cohesion within and between the paragraphs. The analysis has established a number a mistakes in

the use of cohesive devices, lack of cohesive links between the paragraphs in a text, loose structure.

Only 15% of the narrative essays in English and 11% of the narrative essays in Bulgarian meet the criteria for this type of essay: they have global structure consisting of an introduction, body, element of suspense and a conclusion. The conclusion that can be drawn is that either the participants in the experiment had not realized that they were supposed to write a narrative essay, or they are not familiar with the structure of this type of text.

Deficiencies in the textual competence in the native language could be the reason for a similar type of deficiency in a foreign language text, i.e. the tested persons make a transfer of the global structure of the text from their native language to the foreign language. This proves the need for a didactic concept in the foreign language training, which should conform to the norms and characteristics of the global structure of the target language, without excluding the idiosyncrasies of the native language in contrastive aspect.

The difference in the textual competence of the students is bigger in the argumentative essays - 34% of the argumentative essays in English, compared to 24% of the argumentative essays in Bulgarian, meet the respective requirements.

There could be several reasons for this. First, the students write argumentative essays mostly in English, not in Bulgarian. The essay is one of the components of the Sofia University Admission Test of English, as well, and the students are trained and operate with the lexical and grammatical structures that shape the global structure of the argumentative essay. Consequently, here we observe instances of back transfer from the target language to the native language. Both types of transfer are the result of the interaction between the two languages, and the phenomenon is defined as language contact by several authors (Thomason 2001, Myers-Scotton 2002, Clyne 2003, Riehl 2004)

Another reason is the clear lack of planning in most essays. The cohesion of any text is directly connected with the level of planning. A well-planned and well-structured text presupposes a high level of cohesion, which significantly influences the comprehension of the text.

In conclusion we could say that at this stage of the students' English language acquisition the emphasis should be put on their training in the global structure of the text and the cohesive devices within the text, so that the students could enhance their textual competence.

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