

**THESIS SUMMARY:****MASTER IN LANGUAGE AND THE LITERATURE EDUCATION**

Inferential Reading in Language 1 and Language 2 (French)
The Argumentative Text.

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE ROSARIO | FACULTAD DE HUMANIDADES Y ARTES



Author: Carlos Valentini.
Thesis Director: Prof. Graciela Cariello.

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This research analyses whether the students' inferential reading ability of an argumentative text is higher in a foreign language (L2) than in their mother tongue (L1).

Thus, a corpus of 116 tests was taken on 1st to 3rd year tertiary education students of the courses of News-reading, Mass Communication and Marketing, who worked on a Spanish (L1) argumentative text; and a corpus of 69 tests taken on 4th year students learning French (L2) at the *Cursos de Lenguas Extranjeras para la Comunidad* (CLEC), of the Language School at Universidad Nacional de Rosario, who worked on an argumentative text in that foreign language.

Upon contrast of the two result charts –made from the tests answers- it is possible to state that, quantitatively, **Group L2 proved to have greater ability than Group L1 to establish the necessary inferences to fully understand the argumentative text.**

Experts in text types were enquired, and the teachers of both languages elaborated reports both at the time of the tests and after the tests were given. The qualitative data arising from the comparison of those reports **produced the same results.**

The question is, then, why was this ability greater in Group L2 students?

Analysis of the causes that originated the higher level of reading comprehension ability will allow measurement of the impact of foreign language learning (in this case, French) on the development of the argumentative ability in the mother tongue, as well as understanding of the way foreign language learning may contribute to this development. Four possible causes were considered.

CAUSE 1

One of the possible reasons would be to consider that French has a *marked argumentative structure*.

This holds true if we consider some of the adjectives which usually qualify this language: Cartesian-like, fair, proper, accurate. René Descartes (1596-1650) was considered the father of modern philosophy. His organizational and argumentative thinking matches his intention of propounding a new scientific spirit focused on rigor, rationality and knowledge. His *Discourse on Method* was written in French, thus breaking the tradition of Latin as the educated language. This originated a new form of communication which proved essential to the so-called national philosophical schools. Also, it boosted the vernacular language as the proper means to express the complexity of philosophical research.

Moreover, thru the use of the logical connector *donc*, his famous statement *cogito: "Je pense, donc je suis"* demonstrates the argumentative nature of thinking. Descartes' influence marked scientific thinking, and his expressive rigor was widely imitated by the French intellectuals who followed him. Also, during the XIX and XX centuries, Paris became the Western cultural capital and received a large number of foreign artists and thinkers, who irradiated the great ideas to the modern world. Thus, it is natural that a large part of the French and global thinking was constituted on such discursive basis.

On the other hand, Spanish features differ from French features. Spanish has "enormous richness", "intricate complexity" and "huge freedom".

Despite the fact that Spanish is spoken in places distant apart from one another, there is some uniformity as regards spelling and linguistic norm, although it owes its richness to the numerous linguistic substrata in Latin American countries. In the Americas, Spanish is mostly homogenized, but it is also diversified. That is, there are coincidences in the Iberian and Latin American systems, but there are different local and social variations, such as the use of *tú* (*you*, 2nd person singular, colloquial Iberian and northern Latin American Spanish), and *vos* (*you*, 2nd person singular, colloquial Latin American Spanish, mainly River Plate variant), and *usted* (*you*, 2nd person singular, formal Spanish), and *vosotros* (*you*, 2nd person plural, Iberian Spanish) and *ustedes* (*you*, 2nd person plural, Latin American Spanish).

In Spanish, the order of direct/ indirect objects is rather free and the subject can be indicated thru the pronoun or the verb ending.

All these features make Spanish an anarchic -not chaotic- language, with fewer rules, freer, more creative and more complex. From this point of view, Latin American intellectuals have their own expressive form. This contrasts with French rigorous argumentative order, which produces texts that fit the types and are easier to understand.

This situation seems to have been transmitted to Spanish-speaking students too, who are used to reading French texts and forced to think and express themselves in the French way. This might be one of the reasons for their better performance. Likewise, the students who worked on a text in their mother tongue seemed to have faced greater difficulty in an argumentative text that is structured with fewer connectors and discourse markers, which contributed to hinder understanding.

CAUSE 2

From a mainly pedagogic standpoint, and given the linguistic opacity of L2 texts for students, the L2 teacher seems to have been forced to develop a more *didactic* approach to the texts. Thus, the teacher seems to have favored clarity and, consequently, searched for *exemplifying* texts for class-work.

On the other hand, the L1 professor –who relied on the linguistic transparency of the L1 text for students– seems to have favored a more *esthetic* or *juvenilistic* approach to the texts, based on the attraction that the text's content may have on students.

This conclusion demonstrates the current discussion in Argentine education: Should educational stress lay on what *has to* be taught/ learnt from a text, regardless of the *fun/ interest* that the text may awaken in students? In the educational environment, many voices are saying that *common sense* should be applied in the classroom and that the teacher must teach and, sometimes, entertain, and the student must learn and, sometimes, have fun.

This situation seems to be clearly delimited in the L2 class, where the pedagogic deal among the people involved favors acquisition over entertainment, although there are at times occasions for a relaxed atmosphere.

CAUSE 3

L2 students are much more conscious of the linguistic task than L1 students. This is so because L2 students are urged by their own communicative needs, which make the course and their attendance to it meaningful in themselves.

Moreover, the L2 class appreciates time economy: foreign language students know that they have just a few hours per week in contact with the language they intend to study. Therefore, they have a different learning attitude and accept other types of working conditions within the classroom.

Quite the contrary, the students working exclusively in their mother tongue lack this consciousness feeling of communicative and time urgency. Thus, they feel overconfident and reduce their own degrees of self-demand. Plus, as students are in daily contact with L1, both in and out of the classroom, they are not sensitive to the need to increase their own linguistic abilities because they can "communicate" anyway.

This seems to have been another contribution to a better understanding of the argumentative text in L2, since foreign language students are more used to linguistic reflection and inferential work.

Students learning a foreign language increase their knowledge of the world and develop their inferential abilities. Moreover, as they are forced to face a different way of thinking, they also face text diversity, that is, new forms of text organization. This confrontation work between L2 and L1 discursive organization (re)awakens metalinguistic awareness, resulting in feedback between L1, L2 and L1 again, thus enhancing the metacognitive processes and increasing the students' linguistic horizon.

CAUSE 4

As regards texts, it is clear that the use of discursive markers and the knowledge of the argumentative superstructure make the text easier to understand. This has been the main reason why L2 students performed better in reading comprehension. As mentioned above, L1 students faced greater difficulty and showed ignorance of argumentative superstructure and text organization.

The argumentative training of French education based on the production of textual analysis and lecture, and on essay reading is worth highlighting. As indicated above, native French-speaking students are marked by the argumentative structure of their own mother tongue and by intense exposure to these text types during secondary and university education. Consequently, not only do they read but also produce argumentative texts.

This form of training seems to be transmitted to students of French as a foreign language both in the classroom and in the books used for L2 learning, although the syllabuses do not emphasize need to work with argumentative texts in particular.

Quite the contrary, **Argentinean education has an exclusively narrative and descriptive tradition, focused on telling and not on arguing.**

Thus, this ideological matrix is worth analyzing, since it promotes teaching students abilities other than elaborating, validating, or refuting arguments, or defending themselves and supporting ideas.

Why does Argentinean education place so little interest on teaching arguing?

Not surprisingly, French society and education are actually influenced by the French Revolution. Likewise, Argentinean society and education are actually influenced by the National Reorganization Process (the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983).

The series of military coup d` états, starting in 1930 and accentuated in the second half of the XX century, gradually eliminated Argentinean people's arguing ability. Debating ideas, arguing and counter arguing were banned to the citizens. Opposition and discussion were replaced by submission and silence.

In the light of the situation prevailing in the country, education was in accord with totalitarian thinking and became its ideological axis.

Even today, after more than 24 years of uninterrupted democracy, Argentinean society has not yet recovered.

Moreover, globalization tends to emphasize the breach between rich and poor countries. More than ever, the developed countries promote their citizens' education as a way to guarantee their preeminence. Power and knowledge are increasingly more directly associated, in the same sense as are dependence and illiteracy.

EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS

From the conclusions so far some educational proposals can be made for classroom consideration.

* L1 teachers should take the texts they work with as if they were L2 texts, in order to work fully on the text to comprehend. To such aim, L1 teachers should, in the process of their own professional training, acquire at least one L2 that makes them *acquainted with a foreign language*, and makes them aware of the reading and production difficulties of the L1 they teach. This attitude towards texts should be included in teachers' education so that, when selecting, exploiting and assessing texts, teachers may see the texts from the students' perspective.

* Language and Literature contents are obviously geared to the study of literature as a final target and as a higher phase of learning the national language. Nevertheless, French education is also geared to the deep study of literature and, perhaps, in more remarkable ways than the Argentinean educational system. **Argentinean education should revise not its insistence on literary training but its absence of insistence on concrete learning of a another essential text type: the argumentative text**, which is also emphasized by the French education system.

* Peronard (2002) has recently demonstrated that arguing can be found in the first stages of mother tongue acquisition (three-year-old children) and that it reaches an extraordinary development in the stage that precedes schooling. As shown above, the educational system deals with these text types. However, this is so in an almost exclusively theoretical framework, and wastes all the oral argumentative background already acquired by the students in the previous stage. Moreover, the argumentative text is rarely taught in reading comprehension practice and almost systematically null in written production. Much has been said about the importance of meaningful learning. It is a well-known fact that, by setting in motion the theoretical principles, writing practice contributes to fixing the type bases. Consequently, teaching argumentation should be **persistently** reintroduced year after year at reading comprehension and written production levels, with gradual degrees of complexity, as learning can only take place when the acquired knowledge is applied.

* Foreign languages experience lower development of the literary text because it poses greater difficulties. To compensate for this, multiple texts are used. This is usually non-fictional, authentic material, i.e., not intended for classroom use. Thus, L2 students are constantly induced to work in reading comprehension of authentic documents, to give their opinion, to justify. The usual exercise rubrics are "support your answer", "give examples", "justify", "give arguments". By doing so, even if students have not learnt the argumentative text in particular, they already possess additional background knowledge.

Therefore, whenever L1 students face text diversity, they should be trained in written exercise production with the same type of rubrics. Thus, they would be taught how to argue without feeling that theory is a burden on them, as is the case in the L2 class.

Then, in the last school years, such practical argumentative base should be supported by a solid theoretical base, thus improving, at a conscious level, the written production of this text type.

Translated into English by Marcela del Pilar Mestre - Sworn Translator.