

The impact of motivational didactic interventions on the writing process and its output: the case of descriptive texts

El impacto de intervenciones didácticas motivacionales en el proceso y el producto de redacción: el caso de los textos descriptivos

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ABSTRACT

In this article we describe the impact of motivational didactic interventions on the process and the output of writing descriptive texts in Spanish as a Foreign Language by Dutch speaking students of the 3rd Bachelor year of the Applied Linguistics curriculum at the Flemish KU Leuven university. The texts were stored and analysed in the Aprescrilov learner corpus application. The didactic intervention was tested in a pretest – test – posttest setting, both with consecutive and with simultaneous groups: the results of the year 2006-2007 (without intervention) were compared with the ones of 2007-2008 (with intervention), as well as the results of two groups in 2011-2012 (experimental versus control group). The results of quantitative and qualitative tests show an important impact on both process (motivation, enjoyment and perceived improvement) and output (lexical richness and dynamic style) of the writing of the descriptive texts.

Keywords: error analysis, interlanguage, learner corpora, task based language learning, motivation

RESUMEN

En este artículo se describe el impacto de unas intervenciones didácticas motivacionales en el proceso y el output de la escritura de textos

descriptivos en español como lengua extranjera por estudiantes neerlandófonos del 3er año de Grado de la formación de Lingüística Aplicada en la universidad flamenca KU Leuven. Los textos se almacenaron y analizaron en la aplicación del corpus de aprendices Aprescrllov. La intervención didáctica fue puesta a prueba con un diseño pretest – test-postest, con grupos tanto consecutivos como simultáneos: los resultados del año 2006-2007 (sin intervención) fueron comparados con los del año 2007-2008 (con intervención), así como los resultados de dos grupos en 2011-2012 (grupos experimental y de control). Los resultados de las pruebas cuantitativas y cualitativas muestran un impacto significativo en el proceso (motivación, goce y percepción de mejora) y output (riqueza léxica y estilo dinámico) de la escritura de los textos descriptivos.

Palabras clave: análisis de errores, interlengua, corpus de aprendices, aprendizaje de lenguas basado en tareas, motivación

1. INTRODUCTION

The 3rd Bachelor curriculum at the department of Applied Linguistics of the Flemish University of KU Leuven aims at teaching students to produce in the foreign language –in this case Spanish– qualitative texts in the major text genres at a general language level of B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Since our learner corpus Aprescrllov (see section 3 for more details) stores all texts of students of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) and tags them a.o. by genre and error category, it enables us to discover certain tendencies in the output of the learners. In this way the error analysis of the descriptive texts produced between 2003 and 2006 learnt us that one of the most frequent problems in those texts is what we call ‘lexical poverty’: (over)use of the verbs *ser*, *estar*, *hay* (all hyper frequent verbs meaning ‘to be’) and *tener* (‘to have’) – instead of a variety of semantically ‘richer’ variants–, while this error category never enters the top 10 of the most frequent problems in other text genres. A second problem that emerges from the analysis of these

texts is their monotone, static character, which is obviously a consequence of the static “to be” and “to have” verbs, but also of the general point of view chosen by the authors, i.e. static instead of dynamic. Thirdly, in the writing portfolios that learners are asked to hand in after each writing assignment, students showed low motivation when writing the descriptive texts, with an average score of 2.3 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Therefore we adopted for the 2006-2007 edition of the course a TBLT approach, with a strong emphasis on real-life, meaning-making tasks, as well as focus on creativity, learner autonomy, motivation and team work, with pre and post tasks. In the pretasks, focus was set on lexical richness and dynamic style. As students with a task based motivation are expected to consider tasks as challenging and valuable learning experiences, and therefore perform them in a more structured and thorough way (Vandekerckhove, Vandergraesen and Cruysweegs, 2009), we expected this approach to entail a more motivating, meaningful and empowering writing process as well as a better output.

In the following sections we will go into the details of the study. In Section 2 we will provide a brief overview of the general theoretical framework and the key notions used in this study. Section 3 will outline the architecture of the Aprescrilov corpus, Section 4 the methodology and Section 5 the results of the present study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Aprescrilov corpus and Aprescrilov-based case-studies performed to date can be located at the interface of five frameworks, viz. Error Analysis, Interlanguage studies, (Learner) Corpus Research, Task Based Language Learning and Teaching, and Studies on Motivation and Learning. In what follows, we will present succinctly these frameworks.

2.1 Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) has become relevant thanks to the work of Corder (Corder, 1981). It is, essentially, a scientific procedure whose objective is to determine the nature, cause and consequences of errors made by non-native language learners when learning/acquiring a foreign language.

Additionally, the final objective of EA is to draw conclusions from the identification, description and explanation of errors, with the aim of proposing didactic procedures designed to help avoid those errors in the interlanguage (IL) of non-native speakers (see Section 2.2). IL and EA are thus closely related.

Interestingly, in view of severe criticism of EA for paying too much and exclusive attention to learner's errors and deficiencies instead of also analyzing learners' strengths, EA has shifted focus "from mere error analysis to the analysis of performance in its entirety" (Callies et al., 2015: 166). Although errors are obviously more likely to draw analysts' attention, we also keep track of learners' successful uses of a particular linguistic item in our Aprescrilov-based case-studies.

2.2 Interlanguage

The Interlanguage framework (IL) was proposed by Selinker (Selinker, 1972). He hypothesized that in addition to the mother tongue and the learner's foreign language, there is a separate (idiosyncratic) linguistic system in learning processes, viz. the interlanguage. This system is based on observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a Target Language (TL) norm. Selinker called this linguistic system "interlanguage".

IL has also come to be associated with another scholar, viz. Granger, in particular since her seminal paper on Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (Granger, 1996). Granger proposes contrastive IL as the best methodological approach to Learner Corpora. This method compares the target language or L2 with the learner's native language or L1. Preferably, it also includes a comparison between distinct types of learners, with regard to their proficiency level and mother tongue.

2.3 Learner Corpus Research

Research in Learner Corpus Research (LC(R), see a.o. Granger, 2009) has only recently been recognized as a worthy field or subdomain within Corpus Linguistics². Learner Corpora are generally defined as "systematic collections of authentic, continuous and contextualized language use (spoken or written) by L2 learners, stored in electronic format" (Callies and Paquot, 2015: 1). Although the framework initially mainly focused on English, LC of many languages are currently freely available³.

As is the case of corpora of native speaker productions, corpora diverge largely (among others as to size, text genres, year, etc.), usually in function of the corpus designer's research interest.

The introduction of corpus linguistics into language teaching makes it possible for the results of EA and IL studies not to be merely intuitive, descriptive and structuralist, but objectively based on solid data, in this case data from a LC. However, Hasko (2013: 4-5), among others, criticizes the lack of progress in establishing strong, bidirectional links between LC and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), due to (i) a shortage of longitudinal studies that would allow scholars to establish causality in interpreting corpus data analyses, and even better, test the efficiency of pedagogical adjustments and (ii) the fact that it is more typical of LC analysis to describe learner language rather than attempt to explain it. The Aprescrliv project intends to move a step forward in applying LCR to FLT (Cruz Piñol, 2012). Although it has been primarily designed to improve the didactic material and habits in SFL-teaching in Belgium, it allows to analyze the possible interference of more than one language (L1, but also other L2) in foreign language learning (Buyse, Delbecque and Speelman, 2009).

While both EA and IL originated in the 1960-1970s, LCR emerged at the turn of the 1990s (Callies and Paquot, 2015: 1). EA and IL initially included useful studies on several languages, but from the 90s onwards they were used predominantly in the field of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL). Their use for SFL remained limited. LCR researchers were also primarily concerned with EFL at the outset, but rapidly infected SLA researchers of many languages with their enthusiasm. In the light of promising benefits of LC for language learning and teaching, the field is increasingly gaining in interest, but is still considered to be 'on the move' or 'under construction' (Callies and Paquot, 2015; Callies et al., 2015). Hence, with respect to English L2 learner corpus research, Spanish L2 learner corpus research is gradually bridging the gap.

2.4 Task Based Language Learning

Task Based Language Learning and Teaching (TBLT) is an approach in which learning revolves around the completion of meaningful tasks. In the TBL approach (Ellis, 2003), the main focus is the authentic use of language for genuine communication. Tasks

can be real-life situations or have a pedagogical purpose. They should provide opportunities for students to exchange information with a focus on meaning, and have a clear purpose: learners should know the outcome they are expected to produce when they finish performing the task. The outcome may vary, and usually results in an outcome that can be shared with more people.

2.5 Affectivity in Language Learning and Teaching

Affect in learning and teaching is nowadays seen as more effective than a purely cognitive teaching approach (Arnold, 2011; Dewaele, 2005, 2015). As Stevick (1980) states: "Success [in language learning] depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4). The "inside" refers to individual learner factors such as self-concept, anxiety, learner styles, but also to teachers' own personal development. The "between" is about the relational aspects which develop between the participants in the classroom – between students or between teacher and students – or possibly between learners and the target language and culture (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014). Positive affect can provide invaluable support for learning just as negative affect can close down the mind and prevent learning from occurring altogether (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer, 2016).

This explains the growing interest of the intertwining of emotion and cognition both within an institutional context and in extra-institutional contexts where multiple languages and cultures meet (Berdal-Masuy and Pairon, 2015; Dewaele, 2018).

In this study we investigated the possible influences of didactic interventions both on the skills and on the emotions of students when writing (descriptive) texts in SFL, more particularly on perceived L2 improvement and enjoyment (Nakamura, 2018).

3. THE CORPUS

The architecture of *Aprescrilov* – which stands for *Aprender a Escribir en Lovaina* 'Learning to write in Leuven' (see Buyse, 2011) – is based on the models proposed by Díaz-Negrillo and Fernández Domínguez (2006), Granger (1996) and others. It is an online corpus with restricted access for researchers⁴. It allows (i) to perform quasi-longitudinal studies of writings by SFL-students, (ii)

to objectively determine the interference of more than one language, (iii) to take into account both task and learner variability (cf. Granger 2015; Tracy-Ventura & Myles, 2015), and, eventually, (iv) to successfully implement conclusions from studies based on LC in the development of new didactic material (cf. Fernández Pereda, Buyse and Verveckken, 2014).

Aprescrilov consists of two subcorpora. The first, Aprescrilov I, is composed of 2700 texts written in the academic years 2004-2010 by students of Spanish Linguistics and Literature at the Faculty of Arts of the KU Leuven and of Applied Linguistics at the Lessius Hogeschool (now "KU Leuven @ Antwerp"). The compositions were written by 1st, 2nd and 3rd year Bachelor students of these two institutions and have been digitally marked with the same customized version of the Markin program (see a.o. Buyse and González, 2013). This "button set" allows systematic marking of problems or 'errors' in the texts, as well as of positive aspects. The annotations cover all components of writing – from spelling to discourse structure, punctuation, morphology, morphosyntax, pragmatics, lexicon, etc.⁵ The online corpus also includes a qualitative and quantitative description of each component: number of compositions; number of words per text; distribution of text types: descriptive, argumentative, expository and narrative texts, as well as letters. It also contains a search interface which allows us to search (anonymized) examples and their contexts using criteria such as type of problem (or positive aspect), course, academic year or institution (see Figure 1). The corpus contains both assignments and tests.

Aprescrilov

palabra:	<input type="text" value="estar"/>
observaciones:	<input type="text" value="pobreza léxica"/>
carrera:	<input type="text" value="TT"/>
curso:	<input type="text" value="3"/>
año académico:	<input type="text" value="1112"/>
tarea:	<input type="text" value="elige"/>
busca	<input type="text" value="observa las estadísticas"/>

número de párrafos encontrados: 3
 número de observaciones encontradas: 3
 número de palabras encontradas: 3

observa el original	<p>Por supuesto no viviría sola en esta hermosa casa: mi esposo y los hijos estarían <u>sobrecarga léxica</u> también. Tendríamos <u>error cometido anteriormente</u> una planta donde dormirían los niños y otra para nosotros dos, para desconectarnos de la realidad. Esta planta solo consistiría de un dormitorio espacioso acompañado de un cuarto de baño como <u>conectores</u> no hay otro. En la bañera antigua con patas me tomaría una copita de vino chileno de nuestra bodega.</p>
observa el original	<p>El 14 de febrero se celebra el Día de San Valentín. Se trata de una celebración tradicional en la que las parejas de enamorados expresan su amor y cariño mutuamente. Muchos piensan que este día surgió <u>verbo (forma)</u> <u>uso de</u> <u>verificador ortográfico</u> por el interés de los grandes centros comerciales y detestan la cursilería, que cada año llega a su máxima plenitud a mediados de febrero.</p> <p>Aunque entiendo perfectamente, y hasta cierto punto comparto, las críticas de la gente, el martes pasado me puse triste por no poder estar <u>sobrecarga léxica</u> con mi querida novia. <u>buen uso de los tiempos</u></p>
observa el original	<p>Finalmente <u>buen uso de los conectores</u>, la invención <u>uso de la preposición</u> "Twitterature" es muy utili <u>word four gespet</u> <u>uso de</u> <u>verificador ortográfico</u> para los jóvenes, porque les gusta estar al corriente de todo. Viendo <u>referencia</u> en el contexto de la escuela, los jóvenes aprenden cosas <u>sobrecarga léxica</u> sobre la literatura y las obras de importantes escritores <u>orden de palabras (adjetivo)</u>. Cuando utilizan Twitterature, pueden <u>perífrasis verbales (infinitivo)</u> hablar sobre las obras con compañeros o compañeras. Esto va en contra de la tendencia a la baja <u>buen colocación</u> <u>uso de la preposición</u> que los jóvenes leen en menor medida <u>coherencia (cantidad)</u> después de salir del colegio.</p>

Figure 1. Search interface of the Aprescrilov corpus.

The operating extension of the corpus results in an ongoing creation of the second (sub)corpus, *Aprescrilov II*, composed of Spanish texts from Dutch-speaking students of the same institutions, Spanish texts from Dutch students of the Radboud Universiteit (Nijmegen, the Netherlands) and from French-speaking Walloon students of the UCL (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) written in the same period (viz. the academic year 2013-2014) and on comparable subjects. These texts are gathered in an online corpus with the same interface as Aprescrilov I. The corpus is currently

being expanded both with new versions of the same (writing) tasks in the following academic years with new students, and with writing tasks of students in higher years.

Texts were annotated with our customized version of Marlin (see Section 3) by annotators who had been trained in order to obtain a systematic treatment of the same errors (inter-rater reliability test for Kappa = 0.85 with $p < 0.001$). The Aprescrivov corpus allows to perform queries per level, per year and per assignment, and the integrated information on words per text enables us to convert the absolute figures into relative ones.

With regard to the aforementioned shortcomings of LC studies (see 2.3), it is worth mentioning that Aprescrivov varies as to task, learner and other aspects:

- (1) Task: genre, assignments vs test.
- (2) Learner: it includes texts written both by beginners and by advanced learners (viz. successful learners in higher years, allowing pseudo-longitudinal research). Since 2013, metadata on the authors have been available, more precisely on their native language(s), the (amount of) contact with the Spanish language and their proficiency level of other foreign languages. Overall, the corpus contains texts of three main groups of students: (1) Dutch-speaking students in Flanders (Dutch as L1, French as L2); (2) Dutch-speaking students in the Netherlands (Dutch as L1, English as L2); (3) French-speaking Walloon students (French as L1, Dutch as L2).⁶
- (3) Other variables: course, academic year, institution.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As already mentioned in the introduction, the analysis of the descriptive texts of Aprescrivov of the period between 2003 and 2006 and the portfolios of the authors of the texts, revealed three main problems:

- (1) “lexical poverty”, viz. the (over)use of the verbs *ser*, *estar*, *hay* and *tener*, and a lack of semantically ‘richer’ variants
- (2) its monotone, static character, as result of the static “to be” and “to have” verbs, but also of the general point of view chosen by the author, i.e. static instead of dynamic.
- (3) low student motivation when writing the descriptive texts, with an average score of 2.3 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Problems two and three are all the more striking, since one year earlier the authors of these texts, during the writing course of the 2nd bachelor year, had received a two hours class on “lexical poverty” and been trained to avoid it with exercises on sentence and paragraph level (although not on text level), such as the following two (underlining is ours):

(1) Rewrite:

Me gustó mucho el pueblo; pero lo que más me gustó del pueblo fue la plaza porticada. Sin embargo, a mis padres les gustó más la torre de la iglesia del pueblo. (“I liked the village a lot; but what I liked most about the village was its arcaded square. Nevertheless, my parents liked more the tower of the church of the village”).

(2) Find an alternative for the following verbs:

¿Por qué están los coches en las aceras? (“Why are the cars on the sidewalks?”)

En esa tumba hay el cadáver de un español ilustre. (“In this grave there is a famous Spaniard”)

Esa ley tiene 40 artículos muy extensos. (“That law has 40 very extensive articles”)

(...)

Despite of this training, one year later, the same students (now in the 3rd Bachelor), when writing descriptive texts, seem to have forgotten the knowledge and skills they had been training on sentence and paragraph level, as can be deduced from the following example, with 18 instances of the “poor” verbs *ser*, *estar*, *hay* and *tener* on a total of 310 words (italics and underlining are ours):

La casa de mis sueños

Aunque todavía vivo con mis padres, de vez en cuando ya pienso en mi propia casa. Me gusta leer los folletos publicitarios y los catálogos con muebles modernos, pinturas nuevas, aparatos electrodomésticos... En resumidas cuentas, me hace gracia imaginarme cómo será mi casa futura.

En realidad, mi sueño es vivir en la casa –o mejor dicho la hacienda– de mis padres que tiene un patio, un establo, una casa espaciosa y un jardín grande. Después de 18 años aún no está renovada totalmente. Además, quiero modificar y sobre todo modernizar mucho. Prefiero tener un interior moderno y acogedor que incluso sea fácil para limpiar.

Creo que la cocina y la sala de estar son los cuartos más importantes puesto que se está mucho tiempo allí. Me gusta cocinar, de modo que una cocina grande y sobre todo práctica es imprescindible. Voy a pintar la sala de estar de colores cálidos, pero no demasiados oscuros. Además, una chimenea y un parquet oscuro en el rincón para sentarse tienen que aportar al ambiente acogedor.

Los otros cuartos de la planta baja son un estudio donde quiero colocar estantes llenos de libros, un cuarto de los niños, un cuarto con la lavadora y la secadora, y claro, un servicio. También voy a comprar una sauna, ya que es bastante sano y no me gusta el frío.

En el piso de arriba hay 4 habitaciones y un pequeño cuarto de baño. Me gustaría tener un cuarto de baño mayor con baño, dos lavabos y una ducha grande. Voy a tener 2 dormitorios para los niños y uno para los huéspedes. En mi propio dormitorio quiero otro cuarto de baño y un guardarropa muy grande.

No voy a tener tiempo para cuidar del jardín ni de un huerto, sin embargo, quiero tener un jardín con un césped y muchas flores que florecen en diferentes estaciones.

In conclusion, students do not link their knowledge on "lexical poverty" to the genre of descriptive texts.

Therefore we redesigned the introductory class on this genre, including guidelines on how to write this type of descriptive texts. The introduction "new style" contains a comparison between a descriptive text of a Spanish writer and an (anonymized) one by a former student.

A first pre-task consists in listing and counting the instances of the four aforementioned 'poor' verbs in both texts, as well as the lexical and grammatical alternatives used by each author in order to enhance the variation in the students' productions. Together with the teacher they draw the following conclusions:

- Text of professional writer: *Ser* 6, *Estar* 5, *Hay* 4, *Tener* 3 (Total = 18/500, or 3.4%, versus 6% in student text)
- Lexical alternatives:
 - for *Estar* > *pasar muchas horas* ("to spend a lot of hours"), *disfrutar de* ("enjoy"), *vivir en* ("to live in"), *quedarse* ("to stay"), *cocinar* [vs *estar en la cocina*] ("to cook" [vs "to be in the kitchen"]), *jugar* ("to play")...

- for *estar/hay* > *nos encontramos con* ("we find"), *irradiar* ("irradiate"), *caer* ("to fall"), *saltar a la vista* ("to hit in the eye"), *llegar a* ("to arrive at"), *entrar en* ("to enter")...
- ...
- Syntactic alternatives:
 - Postponed adjective / participle: *rodeado de* ("surrounded by")
 - Relative clause: [*está claro* >] *lo que salta a la vista* ("it is obvious that") > "what hits in the eyes is")
 - Pronominal verbs: [*está dividido en*] > *se divide en* ("it is divided into") > *"it divides itself in")
 - Verbal periphrases: *se puede* / *podemos* + inf. ("one can..." / "we can...")

A second pre-task requires the student to rewrite a (poor) descriptive text, aiming at more variation and dynamics, using techniques such as "travelling", where the author moves the angle like a moving camera does in movies. In that exercise he discovers formulas such as the following:

- Dynamics: *bienvenida* ("welcome"), *como puedes ver* ("as you can see"), *empecemos con* ("let us start with") ...

In order to measure the effect of that didactic intervention, we designed the following experiments.

1. 2006-2007 (N = 21): pretest – test – post test without control groups, texts of ±300 words; this experiment was repeated in 2007-2008 (N = 20)

- a. "pretest" (assignment): descriptive text without new instructions
- b. didactic intervention: new introduction (cf. supra)
- c. "Test" (assignment)
- d. "Post test" (*test*, 2 months later)

2. 2011-2012: pretest – test – post test with control group, students being randomly assigned to experimental vs control group (N = 10 vs 11)

- a. "pretest" (assignment): descriptive text without new instructions
- b. didactic intervention: new introduction, only for experimental group
- c. "Test" (assignment)
- d. "Posttest" (*test*, 2 months later)

All activities were assessed by 2 independent raters.

Despite of the very homogeneous character of the population, the students were asked to deliver the following metadata: gender, age, nationality, mother tongue, \pm bilingual, education, earlier Spanish courses, earlier Spanish immersion period(s), other languages.

Participants were also asked to answer a short list of questions in a portfolio. Besides procedural items such as "did you look at the model of the text genre before starting to write?", "did you brainstorm on the topic beforehand?", "did you work out a structure for the text before starting to write?", students were asked to score their motivation, their enjoyment and their perceived improvement when writing the descriptive text on a scale from 1 (not motivating / enjoying / improving at all) to 5 (extremely motivating / enjoying / improving).

Our research hypotheses were the following.

(RH1) The didactic intervention will have a positive and significant effect on lexico-grammatical richness and on the dynamic and creative character of the descriptive text. Hence, the variables "lexico-grammatical richness" and "dynamic expression" will increase, as well as the general score for the test. The variables "lexical poverty" and "static expression" will decrease.

(RH2) The level of lexico-grammatical richness and textual dynamics will drop significantly in the post test (due to time lapse and different conditions of the activity).

(RH3) The student will be more motivated when writing texts of this text genre.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table I shows the results of the first experiment (with consecutive groups). They seem to confirm **RH1**: the general scores for the years 06-07 and 07-08, respectively, improve with 14,5 to

20% between pretest and test, and accordingly for lexico-grammatical richness and dynamic expression (increase of occurrences with 94 till 115%), on the one hand, and lexical poverty and static expression (decline of 38 till 125%), on the other. A series of paired samples t-tests revealed that the differences between pretest and test are significant: for 2006-2007 there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest ($M=11.3$, $SD=1.62$) and test ($M=14.2$, $SD=1.17$) conditions; $t(20)=-16.02$, $p = 0.000$; for 2007-2008 there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest ($M=11.0$, $SD=1.21$) and test ($M=15.0$, $SD=1.39$) conditions; $t(19)=-17.69$, $p = 0.000$.

RH2, on its turn, does not seem to be confirmed, as there is only a minor decrease of the general score when comparing test and posttest: for 2006-2007 there was no significant difference in the scores for test ($M=14.2$, $SD=1.17$) and posttest ($M=14.1$, $SD=1.18$) conditions; $t(20)=1.45$, $p = 0.162$; for 2007-2008, there was no significant difference neither in the scores for test ($M=15.0$, $SD=1.39$) and posttest ($M=14.5$, $SD=1.76$) conditions; $t(19)=-16.02$, $p = 0.016$.

The same holds for the more specific parameters (lexical poverty, lexico-grammatical richness, static expression and dynamic expression): the differences between pretest and test are significant ($p<0.01$), the ones between test and posttest are not ($p>0.01$).

A Spearman rank correlation analysis revealed no highly significant influences of the variables listed in the metadata document: criteria such as gender, age, nationality, mother tongue, other languages, type of education showed no correlation with the results ($r=< .10$); even criteria with stronger possible influences such as \pm bilingual upbringing, earlier Spanish courses and earlier Spanish immersion period(s) showed only small possible influences ($r=.10 - .29$).

	General score		Lexical poverty		Lexico-grammatical richness		Static expression		Dynamic expression	
	/20 points		/300 words		/300 words		/300 words		/300 words	
	0607	0708	0607	0708	0607	0708	0607	0708	0607	0708
Pre t	11.3	11.0	10.3	12.7	2.8	5.4	35.3	33.8	2.6	4.3
Test	14.2	15.0	2.6	3.2	23.1	24.3	10.7	8.7	25.3	27.3
Post t	14.1	14.5	3.6	3.4	20.3	24.1	12.2	8.9	23.7	26.8

Table I. Results of quantitative analysis. Average scores of 2006-2007 and 2007-2008

The analysis of the portfolios confirms **RH3**: the writing of the descriptive texts is now scored as highly motivating (averages of 4 and 4.2 on a scale of 5 vs the average of 2.3 in the portfolios of earlier years before the didactic intervention), highly enjoyable (averages of 4.1 and 4.0, vs 2,4 before) and with a highly positive effect on the perceived improvement (averages of 4.1 and 4.3, vs 2,6 before).

Table II shows the results of the second experiment (with experimental and control group). Also in this experiment the general scores improve between pretest and test, with 30% for the EG and 11.5% for the CG, and accordingly for lexico-grammatical richness and dynamic expression (increase of occurrences with 115 till 116% for EG vs 6 to 21% for CG), on the one hand, and lexical poverty and static expression (decline of 45 till 127% for EG vs 3.5 to 8.5 for CG), on the other. A series of paired samples t-tests revealed that the differences between pretest and test are significant in both groups: for EG there was a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=10.5, SD=0.97) and test (M=16.5, SD=1.50) conditions; $t(9)=-23.24$, $p = 0.000$; for CG there was also a significant difference in the scores for pretest (M=11.2, SD=1.33) and test (M=13.5, SD=0.93) conditions; $t(10)=-11.66$, $p = 0.000$.

In this case, **RH1** is confirmed by a series of independent samples t-tests, which revealed that, on the one hand, the results at the pretests of both groups are comparable: there was no significant difference in the scores of the EG (M=10.5, SD=0.97) and CG (M=11.2, SD=1.33) conditions; $t(19)=-1.33$, $p = 0.199$; and, on the other hand, the differences between the results of both groups at the tests and post tests were significant: for the test, EG (M=16.5, SD=1.50) and CG (M=13.5, SD=0.93) conditions; $t(19)=5.62$, $p = 0.000$; for the post test, EG (M=16.2, SD=1.16) and CG (M=13.2, SD=0.60) conditions; $t(19)=7.71$, $p = 0.000$. The same holds for the differences between the values of EG and CG of the more specific parameters ($p < 0.01$).

RH2, on its turn, does not seem to be confirmed here neither: we only note a minor decrease of the general score when comparing test and posttest (-1.5%, both for EG and CG). For EG there was no

significant difference in the scores for test ($M=16.5$, $SD=1.51$) and posttest ($M=16.2$, $SD=1.14$) conditions; $t(9)=-1.96$, $p = 0.081$; for CG, there was no significant difference neither in the scores for test ($M=13.5$, $SD=0.93$) and posttest ($M=13.2$, $SD=0.60$) conditions; $t(10)=-1.40$, $p = 0.192$.

The same holds for the more specific parameters: the differences between pretest and test are significant ($p<0.01$), the ones between test and posttest are not ($p>0.01$).

Again, a Spearman rank correlation analysis revealed no highly significant influences of the variables listed in the metadata document, neither for criteria such as gender, age, nationality, mother tongue, other languages, type of education ($r< .10$), nor for criteria such as \pm bilingual upbringing, earlier Spanish courses and earlier Spanish immersion period(s) ($r=.10 - .29$).

	General score /20	Lexical poverty /300	Lexico-grammatical richness /300	Static expression /300	Dynamic expression /300
Pre test					
EG	10.5	11.2	2.3	35.6	2.6
CG	11.2	12.3	2.5	32.3	3.2
Test					
EG	16.5	2.2	25.6	10.2	25.6
CG	13.5	11.6	6.7	30.6	4.4
Post test					
EG	16.2	3.3	23.2	12.6	23.4
CG	13.2	12.6	5.6	32.3	3.4

Table II. Results of quantitative analysis: experimental group (EG) vs control group (CG). Average scores of 2011-2012.

The analysis of the portfolios confirms also RH3: the writing of the descriptive texts is scored as highly motivating by the students of the EG (average of 4.4 on a scale of 5, vs an average of 2.4 in the portfolios of the control group), enjoyable (EG: average of 4, vs 2,3 for CG) and with a highly positive effect on the perceived improvement (EG: average of 4.1, vs 2,8 for CG).

By way of illustration we copy here an example of a text (posttest) produced by a student of the EG (3 "poor verbs" vs 27 "rich expressions" on a total of 283 words):

Se vende burbuja financiera: la Residencia de los Reyes Magos

Entrando por la puerta inmediatamente notamos que los Reyes Magos han incorporado su origen en la decoración de la casa. Pasamos por estatuas griegas igual que budistas y vudúes. Acudiendo a la cocina ya olemos las especias que provienen de tres continentes diferentes. En la cocina vemos grandes hornos que los Reyes utilizaban para cocer artículos de confitería. Colgados por todas partes hay crucifijos que nos recuerdan el origen de este día tan especial para los españoles. Las otras habitaciones a nivel del suelo se utilizaban para producir los regalos. Máquinas de empaquetar aparecen al lado de mesas de diseño.

Subiendo a la primera planta por una escalera ancha encontramos las habitaciones de los reyes y sus pajes. En un rincón oscuro se esconde una escalera muy estrecha que nos permite el acceso al desván. Allí arriba, nos damos cuenta de que había un museo. Colgadas en la pared vemos múltiples imágenes relatándonos el origen de los Reyes. Para bajar utilizamos el medio más rápido siendo un tobogán espiral que da al jardín.

Situado en un monte, el jardín nos presta una vista espectacular sobre Andalucía. Descendiendo del monte buscamos la entrada al túmulo donde apilaban todas las cartas recibidas de los niños. A los nuevos propietarios les costará vaciar el sitio. Seguimos descendiendo hasta el pie del monte donde se encuentran los establos de los camellos. Abriendo la verja para pasar a los establos, en un santiamén, estamos rodeados por ovejas, cabras y gallinas. Nos estorban el paso manifestando claramente que están hambrientas. Empujando los animales a un lado nos dirigimos hacia la zona segura, fuera de la verja. Un telesquí nos lleva a la cumbre del monte donde termina nuestra visita.

Since this didactic intervention is now systematically applied when the text genre of descriptive texts is introduced, the category of 'lexical poverty' has left the top 5 of most frequent problems in general, and in descriptive texts in particular.

On the other hand, the Aprescrilov corpus has certain limitations and could benefit from a number of extensions that are

currently missing due to lack of funding: lemmatization and POS-tagging would open a whole range of new research perspectives; tagging of all contexts without a certain error, i.e. which may have a learning potential for a specific problem (in Aprescrilov, for legibility reasons this is only done for a few studies, as Markin does not allow multi-layer annotation and the annotated versions are first sent to the students).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study offers insights into the essential role of learner corpora such as Aprescrilov in the evolution of errors by students and student groups, and shows how powerful some methodological and didactic changes can prove to be, both for the writing process (motivation, enjoyment, perception of improvement) and for the output (richness of the writing product).

However, the study is limited to the writing of one text genre by students of one type of department in a Flemish university, with a very homogeneous population regarding age, education, mother tongue, etc. More studies into other languages at other departments in other countries should be carried out in order to be able to extrapolate to other populations.

NOTES

1 Some results of a pilot of this study were previously published in Buyse, Fernández Pereda and Verveckken (2016).

2 The emergence is situated at “the turn of the 1990s” (Callies and Paquot 2015: 1) but the field has developed rapidly. It now has a proper international academic association (the Learner Corpus Association) holding an international conference every two years. A proper handbook has been published by Granger and colleagues. Since April 2015, it also has its own international scientific journal (International Journal of Learner Corpus Research, John Benjamins) (cf. Callies and Paquot, 2015: 1-3; Callies *et alii*, 2015: 160-161).

3 Cf. the LC listed in the online overview by Granger *et al.*:

<http://www.uclouvain.be/en-cecl-lcworld.html>.

4 Aprescrilov is available at <http://ilt.kuleuven.be/aprescrilov> under the acceptance of the terms and conditions stated in the introduction. The interface and search buttons are both in Dutch (the language of the institution, KU Leuven, Belgium) and in Spanish.

5 Markin, elaborated by Creative Technology, allows noting down compositions digitally. "It is a Windows program which runs on the teacher's computer. It can import a student's text for marking by pasting from the clipboard, or directly from an RTF or text file. Once the text has been imported, Markin provides all the tools a teacher needs to mark and annotate the text. When marking is complete, the teacher can export the marked text as an RTF file for loading into a word-processor, or as a web page so that students can view the marked text in a web browser. Marked work can even be emailed directly back to the student, all from within the Markin program." (<https://www.cict.co.uk/markin/index.php>)

6 The corpus takes advantage of the institutional differences between Belgium and the Netherlands in foreign language teaching at primary/secondary education level. The Aprescrllov corpus includes three groups of SFL-learners, characterized by two distinct mother tongues (Dutch vs. French) and distinct L2s (French – English – Dutch), and in doing so, allows to determine not only the inference of L1 on the IL of SFL-learners but also the interference of L2. The underlying hypothesis is that differences in performances may be found between the three learner groups and that some differences may be due to the a distinct degree of interference from French, according to the following cline: French-speaking students will probably make more errors reflecting the influence of French than Dutch students, while Flemish students will be situated at the center of the scale, between French-speaking and Dutch students, due to the different status of French as a FL in Flanders and the Netherlands.

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