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Chapter: Curriculum Development

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Writing Transition: A Corpus-Supported Study of the Freshmen's Written Argumentation Competence Building

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Abstract

In Romania, writing is the primary means of assessing student knowledge ever since the adoption of the Bologna Process. Often, students are expected to have learned academic, as well as professional writing, in high school, or to learn it intuitively at university. Previous studies indicate that, in Romania, the genres learned in high school only slightly overlap with the genre's students are asked to produce at university. In the present paper, we use corpus linguistics methods to analyse and compare the Romanian students' entrance-level writing, reflecting the high school norms, with their first-year examination writing. As our aim is also to capture the diversity of linguistic and educational challenges the students are confronted with when building their written argumentation competence in their mother tongue, we contrast writing processes in Romanian (L1) in the frame of a course in literary theory. The research methodology involves the compilation of two corpora: (a) a corpus of novice writing, NoviceRO (30 essays), and (b) a corpus of first year writing as part of a compulsory Introduction to Literary Theory class, LitRO (30 essays). We look at rhetorical and linguistic patterns related to argumentation in terms of frequency and effective logical and textual integration. Our findings provide insight into the pedagogical complexities of accompanying the Romanian students in their transition from pre-university towards university writing norms.

Keywords: high school versus university writing, corpus-based academic writing studies, written argumentation, Romanian freshmen writing, literary essay writing

1. Introduction

When students transition from high school to university they have to adapt to a series of new teaching and learning environments, all reflected in the way students write [1, 2].

Romanian students might experience this transition even more profoundly than students from other national educational settings, considering the fact that the Romanian pre-university teaching methods are rather prescriptive and education rather theoretical [3, 4]. Thus, freshmen, who are used to being given theory-driven instructions for home and evaluation assignments plunge into higher education curricula where autonomous and integrative learning is encouraged. Almost all university activities involve writing: from note taking, to progress and exam papers, students write constantly. More than that, ever since the adoption of the Bologna Process, the law (i.e., No. 288/ 2004) stipulates that each of the three university cycles should end with a thesis. In spite of this, L1 academic writing (AW) courses in Romania are not guided by national educational policy and writing support is provided according to each university's internal policies. Often, students are expected to learn AW intuitively at university, in parallel to disciplinary knowledge, or to have learned to write academically in high school.

2. Writing as learning assessment

2.1 Writing in high school

The Romanian language and literature high school (i.e., from the 9th until the 12th grade) curriculum covers, a wide range of sub-disciplines and topics. Along with a variety of functional and didactic genres (e.g., narration of personal experiences, descriptions, summaries, character portrayals, reading reports, analysis papers, structured essays, free essays, etc.), students are required to write argumentative essays. The argumentative essay is prominent in high school largely because it is often a written task in the high school graduation exam (Romanian *Bacalaureat*). The exam essay is evaluated by looking at several pre-established academic writing parameters such as giving personal opinions or using connectors and opinion phrases correctly. Essay writing challenges arise precisely as a result of exaggerating – for convenience or other reasons – the importance of these elements at the expense of understanding the text, and of carrying out as little research as possible to support the argumentative approach as a whole. In the absence of these other components, producing an argumentative text is a superficial process, a mechanical adaptation of a template, where the emphasis falls on the use of learned connectors. Personal input becomes secondary.

2.2 Writing at the university

Recently, a study [5] conducted by academics from the West University of Timisoara, interested in studying the various forms of university writing, has emphasized that first year students have rather precarious writing skills. The aim of the research was not only to assess the Romanian traditional writing model as implicit, practiced by imitation or characterized by little or no theoretical and methodological reflection, but it also pleaded for introducing (academic) writing courses in the university curricula and for developing this discipline as an instrument for improving the research and the communicational skills of the students doing a BA or MA degree [6].

3. Writing transition

3.1 Context

At the Department of Philology, students who wish to study Romanian as one of their major or minor specialization (many of them have English as their minor specialization) must pass an entrance exam where one task is a written essay of approx. 500 words.

The topic of the essay is the textual analysis of a literary text not studied previously but authored by one of the writers studied in high school. These essays form the NoviceRO corpus.

During first-year courses, freshmen will usually have to write similar essays in the form of individual work tasks for various disciplines. For example, one of the general courses, which is compulsory, is *Introduction to Literary Theory*. It is a discipline that aims at familiarizing the first-year students with the specific “language” of Literary and Cultural Studies. These essays form the LitRO corpus.

3.2 Data and methodology

The NoviceRO corpus comprises 30 essays written as part of university entrance exam, on topics related to literary works studied in high school, amounting to 10,119 total words (2,343 types). The LitRO corpus also contains 30 essays, written by freshmen as part of the summative examination of a literary theory class. It is made up of 10,808 total words (2,411 types). The texts selected to be included in the corpus were randomly selected, irrespective of the marks awarded to the students for their performance. The

30 essays in the LitRO corpus were selected according to the students' major and minor (Romanian and English).

In order to perform corpus-based analyses, we used the online concordance and visualization tool Voyant Tools [7]. The main tool features used were Cirrus, Terms, Trends, Phrases, Contexts and Correlations. Our conclusions are based on frequencies of occurrence and co-occurrence of types/tokens as well as n-Grams and collocations.

3.3 Results

Considering that the NoviceRO corpus contains the texts students write as they enter university, the corpus captures the implementation of the linguistic instructions they have been given in high school. First, we could notice several argumentation patterns specific for the discipline of literary studies:

- a) use of syntactic structures that define the literary genre: “apartine” (EN *belongs*) or “textul este” (EN *the text is*); the frequency of use and individual preference for variations within the lexical field of “apartine” (EN *belong / belonging / can belong*) can be visualised in Figure 1. A total of 37 lexical-field occurrences could be identified. The most frequent collocation for *belong*, at R1 position (i.e., first position to the right) is *genre* (collocation pattern: “apartine genului” – EN *belongs to the genre*). The second R1 co-occurrence is “curentul literar” (EN *literary movement*).

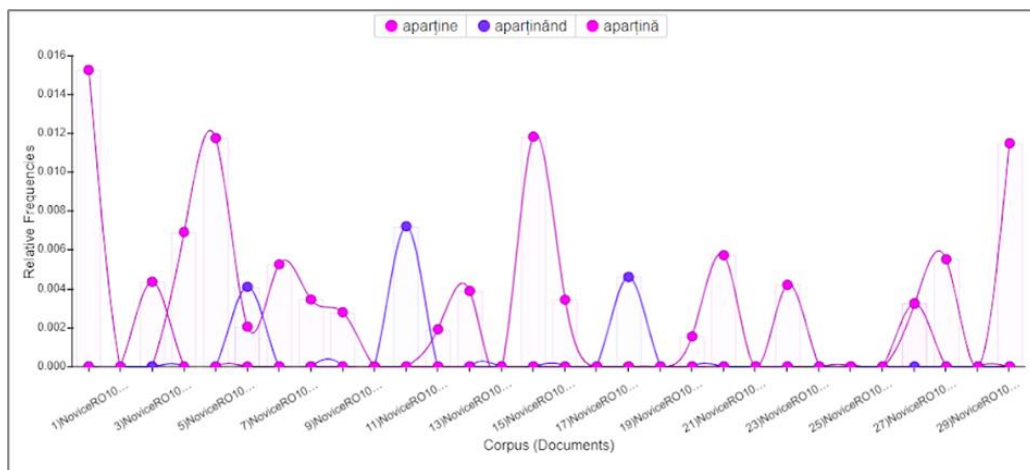


Fig. 1. Use of “apartine” (EN *belongs*) in the NoviceRO corpus

- b) use of syntactic structures that express opinions on the poetic intentions of the author: “autorul/autoarea își exprimã” (EN *the author expresses his/her*);
- c) use of syntactic structures that define the topic: “tema” (EN *topic*), “tematica” (EN *thematics*). Most construction (N=69) are represented by the configuration “tema” (EN *the topic*) followed by the Genitive (e.g., “poeziei” – EN *of the poem*).
- d) use of standard opinion phrases: “în opinia mea” (EN *in my opinion*), “consider cã” (EN *I consider that*), “pot afirma” (EN *I can assert that*);
- e) use of syntactic structures that describe the outline of the text: “textul este structurat” (EN *the text is structured*).

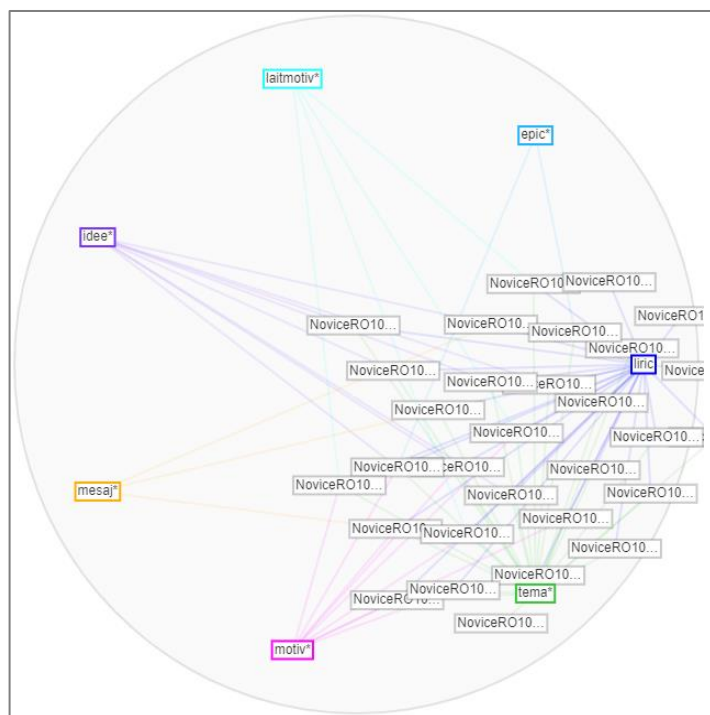


Fig. 2. Use of thematic key words in the NoviceRO corpus

A secondary level of analysis brings to light salient thematic key words. These vocabulary items represent the core of the lexical profile of student texts as most of their written discourse centres around them. Some of them are highly frequent (e.g., “tema” – EN *topic*, “motiv” – EN *motive*) while other are less frequent but also discipline-specific (e.g., “lyric” – EN *lyrical*, “laimotiv” – EN *leitmotive*).

Contrastively, looking at the data in the LitRO corpus, other features seem prevalent:

- syntactic structures used for argumentation in entrance-exam papers are still present but less frequent, e.g., *belong* (N=9);
- higher lexical diversity (e.g., *illustrate* as description verb);
- better use of disciplinary vocabulary (e.g., “figuralitate” – EN *figurality*).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the two written-assignment corpora (NoviceRO and LitRO) aimed at contrasting high school norms with first-year university writing norms through the lenses of the linguistic strategies the students adopt in order to construct arguments. The case study was conducted for the didactic genre of literary analysis. After calculating frequencies for all tokens and recurrent phrases in each corpus, results could be extracted on the patterns of syntactic structures, opinion-giving phraseology and thematic key words. What is noticeable is the fact that standard phraseology taught in high school as a must-use-list for literary text analyses (highly frequent in NoviceRO), was replaced by a tendency to focus on argumentation itself rather than on the linguistic markers that shape it. It was indeed one of the main objectives, and a challenge at the same time, that university teachers pursued, namely that students should be taught to use language to express valid and personal arguments rather than construct arguments within given phraseological parameters. This was inferred from the decrease in frequency of standard phrases and an increase of phrases that are unique (i.e., the student’s personal writing style is more refined). Another observed phenomenon was the drastic reduction of arguments that refer to the author, i.e., what the author intended in the piece of literature analysed, in freshmen’s writing, counterbalanced by an increase

in the ability to critically bring arguments in favour of a personal opinion without theorising too much on the topic. In general, the transition from high school to university writing brings about transformations in point of lexical diversification and density, sentence conciseness and an improvement in the overall academic writing style. One of the studies is that freshmen writing can be corrected to move away from prescriptive writing norms prevalent in high school in the direction of opinionated writing. Another conclusion would be that transition process towards improved academic writing can be assessed with the help of a contrastive corpus approach, such as the one presented in this study.

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