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to Effect Students' Textual Competence

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# Implementing a Text Oriented Approach to Effect Students' Textual Competence

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present the framework of a nine month research study concerning the textual competence of a group of Greek upper primary school students. More specifically, the paper discusses the degree to which the students' level of textual competence is influenced by the use of alternative teaching material and methods developed on the precepts of the communicative-text oriented approach versus that which is currently used in the Greek schools. It also examines how effective the language arts instruction is today with respect to students' communicative competence in written discourse. Analysis of the intervention data allows that using appropriately modified teaching materials and methods can increase students' level of textual competence. The results of the present study appear to indicate also that the type of instruction currently provided has not produced the expected results, although the National Course Curriculum for Language Arts in the Greek Primary School calls for an approach to language teaching centered on communication and textual competence. In contrast, our study attempted to present a case for abandoning traditional teaching behaviors by designing and implementing a text-oriented teaching approach. Thus, we found that the comparative study of various authentic texts from the social environment we live in contributed to the improvement of students written discourse, not only of those less privileged students facing the greatest difficulties but also for those who are considered more privileged. An emphasis on enhancing the use of various strategies to produce specific and appropriate text types, using the knowledge — transforming model of writing and a process versus a product focused orientation, appears to have been fundamental to the students' development of textual competence. Our study speaks also to the need for more studies in different socio-cultural environments.*

Keywords: Primary-Secondary Education, Textual Competence, Communicative Competence, Genre, Text Types, Writing Production, Written Discourse, Text Oriented Approach, Writing as a Process, Knowledge Transforming Model of Writing

## Introduction

### The Problem

**T**HE NATIONAL LANGUAGE Arts Curriculum in the Greek Primary School calls for an approach to language teaching centered on communication and textual competence. Stated curricular policy for years has given priority to developing textual competence in children. However, written discourse instruction in Greek schools, while being dubbed communicative, has tended to be more focused on grammatical and lexical development.

Several studies conducted in Greece note the absence of language instruction methods focused on a textual competence (Kostouli, 1997, 1999, 2000; Papoulia-Tzelepi, 2000a,b; Papoulia-Tzelepi & Spinthourakis, 2000; Fterniati, 2001; Fterniati & Spinthourakis, 2004). These studies argue that, contemporary language teaching practice in Greek schools promotes a sentence based view of language. It lacks interactive opportunities and is virtually devoid of socio-cultural and communicative discourse dimensions. Teachers, while satisfying the surface requirements of the language arts class, tend

not to spend time on the actual teaching of writing. When they do include teaching of writing, teaching time is very limited and tends to be giving directions that do not differentiate between the text-types to be taught. Thus, despite many discussions on the subject, it would appear that specific textually communicative-mode language teaching methods are not well known and continue to maintain a theoretical and non-implementation status.

Therefore, we would argue that one of the possible reasons children lack fully developed textual competence may be due to a mismatch between what is said to be needed (curriculum policy) and the manner in which materials and teaching practices are actualized (praxis).

### Approaches Related to Text-Oriented Teaching

A great deal of interest has been generated internationally on development of the text-oriented approach. A basic goal of the approach is the expansion of literacy to increase communicative competence. This has special importance in view of the various dimensions of social multiliteracy in a multicultural society (Kress, 1998; Kostouli, 2005).



In an effort to broaden discourse competence, different strategies are employed. These are realized by introducing and progressing through three basic steps: study of various types of authentic texts as they appear in their communication context, production of different text-types by the students and the assessment and process improvement of the aforementioned texts.

Various proposals supporting text-oriented teaching and materials use have been presented (e.g. McCarthy & Carter, 1994) and include suggestions that can be adapted by teachers. In the last decade, research indicates an explicit tendency (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) for text production and processing to be integrated into wider communicative activities using critical methods. To have positive effects, we have to enhance the child's active cooperation and interaction with his/her peers in groups and the teacher, as language production is perceived as an interactive social process.

Textual competence isn't developed based on rules or only on the development of some partial linguistic skills (MacArthur, Harris and Graham, 1994). Instead, it is enhanced through the various strategies that students employ depending on the subject, purpose, audience and text-type to be produced.

In the past decade, a number of studies on discourse competence and genre approach have been conducted (i.e. Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Hyon, 1996). Their focus was on investigating the issue of how to best go about teaching language in a multicultural society. They linked identification, categorization and variety of text-type to material use with program parameters such as specified time cycles, text-oriented instruction and an atmosphere of collaboration.

### **Purpose**

Our purpose here is to present the intervention framework as well as results of a nine-month research study. The study was concerned with use of alternative teaching material and methods developed on the precepts of the communicative-text-oriented approach versus those currently used in the Greek primary schools with respect to students' communicative competence in written language. Emphasis was placed on enhancing the use of various strategies to produce specific and appropriate text-types.

### **Methodology**

The study took place in three Greek state primary schools. The grades that participated were two 5<sup>th</sup> (aged 10-11), and one 6<sup>th</sup> (aged 11-12). The population of the study consisted of 60 (32 boys and 28 girls) students. The schools were in a large city and were chosen so that students coming from high as

well as lower parental socio-educational levels were represented. While no specific attempt was made to include children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, a number of non Greek speaking children participated in the study.

Our study was predicated on the designing and implementing a text-oriented teaching approach in these classes. During the nine-month study the teachers and the students worked with four researcher-designed teaching material dossier-notebooks each with an average of 100 pages of texts and activities. The research groups were taught 8-hours a week of language arts using the new material and teaching approach for the entire nine-months. Each student had his/her portfolio serving as their record of progress, where all activities were stored.

Initial teacher training lasted 30-hours and included language teaching theory, practices and modeling. Moreover, in an effort to provide continuous training, bimonthly meetings between the researchers and the teachers were set up for the duration of the study. The sessions were based in large part on the exchange of experiences between teachers thus allowing for the application and evaluation of the new material. These discussions often led to new proposals and helped clarify elements of the new approach.

The presence of the researchers was deemed necessary on numerous occasions, ranging from the recording of observations to providing help to the teachers when requested. Observation often became participatory when the researchers were asked to take part in the teaching procedure or to work with student groups. Other techniques which helped the feedback procedure were the teacher's ethno-methodological diaries as well as the interviews with the students. This qualitative follow-up constituted the basis for discussions in the feedback-training meetings and in conjunction with the assessment of the student portfolio was critical to the evaluating the efficacy of the intervention.

### **Materials Development and Teaching Intervention**

#### **Objectives**

The basic objective was to develop in the students the competence to effectively communicate by perceiving and producing different text-types. Within this framework we hoped to also help students become aware of the linguistic system. This was attempted by working through the perceived (comprehension and processing) text-types as well as through their respective production. The students were required to draw on their knowledge of and experience with the previous text-type process they had worked

on and to produce their text. The texts given were in all cases 'authentic' and the entire discourse production was always contextualized. By this we mean that the communicative context was provided: who was speaking or writing, to whom, for what purpose, what topic, where, and when. The entire process culminated in the assessment of the discourse produced by the students themselves.

### **Instructional Materials and Activities**

The instructional material included either literature texts or texts from the wider social environment (print media articles, advertisements, informative documents, directions, maps, etc.) These texts belonged to different text-types (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, etc.).

The teaching of these texts required the student's systematic exploitation of the text details and elements. The students were required to interpret both the form and content of each text studied and to use these as 'templates' to produce their own.

Each text-type required specialized teaching according to the specific textual characteristics being studied. These included the standard organization of each text-type (superstructure) as well as the linguistic means used as structural elements for the composition of the text-type. Thus, the students were taught the function of the linguistic elements and the manner in which these construct the textual cohesion and register of each text-type.

The activities that followed each text were distinguished as follows: comprehension (content and structural comprehension), oral discourse production, written discourse production, grammar (morpho-syntactic), cross thematic, as well as game-like vocabulary and orthography (i.e., hidden word games, Hangman, puzzles, board games, etc.).

Multiple-choice and true-false questions for content comprehension practice purposes were used by all students, but were especially useful for students who had differentiated difficulties, such as Greek as second language students (GSL) as well as those exhibiting learning disabilities. These types of questions allowed the GSL students the option of not having to draw upon abstract concepts but to utilize the 'clues' available from the range of answers offered. This served as a more effective support for their learning process.

The proposed activities highlighted the uniqueness of each text-type organization and the function of the linguistic means. The specific activities, in other words, were intended to lead the student to the choices that could help them become aware of the relationship between the author's intention and the linguistic means required to achieve that end.

Furthermore, they took on a 'game-like' format and activated the creativity and imagination of the student. Most of them presupposed imitating every day communication situations. These included having the student and/or group take on a specific role and verbally, using the appropriate format, act out the required communication situation. The student was led through these activities to an awareness of the need to adapt the register and linguistic means according to audience, purpose and text-type to be produced.

In designing the activities, we carefully considered the student's inter-group and individual cognitive as well as socio-cultural differences, thus, text and activities having differing degrees of difficulty were provided. These were, from a linguistic and pedagogical perspective, appropriate for the given age and needs of groups requiring a differentiated teaching approach.

We need to point out that teachers could choose to use the material as is or adapt it to the level and strengths of his/her class. He/She could, for example replace parts of the authentic-documentary texts with something more appropriate and topical, while keeping the basic procedural concepts. Furthermore, he/she could decide to use the activities as is or to change them according to the student's interests and abilities, as long as the activities chosen corresponded to the objectives previously set. Thus, the degree of activity difficulty may have differed but the objective remained the same. In this way, students needing more support could have less difficult activities but these met the same objective. This was the reason that many activities had a notation related to their difficulty degree. For groups who needed extra attention, activities linked to oral communicative competence and group cross-thematic activities that find expression through the arts were available. These included role-playing, school plays, songs and other collaborative school functions.

### **Evaluation-Assessment**

The evaluation was used to support both teaching and learning. It served to give information on individual progress and to guide the teaching accordingly. The central purpose of evaluation was not to grade the student but rather to improve the discourse produced.

Evaluation was considered primarily as being formative in nature. It emphasized 'processes' and not 'product'. It thus linked with the feedback between the processes of teaching-learning.

It derived from the teacher-student(s) collaboration and yet, involved each student individually. This collaboration was imperative to the discourse assess-

ment because through it the student was led towards improving his/her discourse.

More important than the student evaluation was the discourse assessment, that is assessment of the texts given as well as the texts produced by the student him/herself (self-assessment) and from his/her classmates (peer-assessment). In this framework, assessment was supported by prescribed and clearly delineated criteria using analytic descriptions so that the student was able to decode the received message without confusion. The self-assessment presupposed recognizing and locating the discourse quality criteria. In fact, it was imperative that what was considered successful and effective discourse production become clear.

The assessment criteria were drawn from the objectives of each teaching module. The teaching act needed to include these, thereby allowing students to discover them. It was critical that they were discussed between teacher and student(s) thus allowing for the active involvement of the students in the process of eliciting the quality criteria. This process also included the student's involvement in determining what appropriate and effective discourse under specific situations was and comparing this to the discourse they produced. This allowed them to become aware of fields that needed improvement and transformed their weaknesses into personal objectives, thus helping in motivating them.

The major criteria of any form of assessment were the effectiveness of the discourse type in alignment with the purpose, as well as its acceptability. The latter, could be further factored down to assessment elements such as appropriateness of content, form, vocabulary, register, morphosyntactic use, orthography and the general appearance of the text.

The errors were treated as clues to a student's temporary communicative competence level. Every error was handled creatively, providing opportunities for productive discussions and comparative activities. The objective was for students to develop discourse quality criteria and to be aware of them so as to be in a position to use them when they had to produce discourse.

An overriding objective for the teacher was to make the student responsible for what he/she produced which meant evaluating and correcting on his/her own.

Therefore, assessment was considered as a long and ongoing process which included designing, producing, and editing of the student's text. These were achieved by systematic guidance provided in different formats such as: questions which highlighted the basic structural points of the given text-type; clear references to the elements which they should check on; self-assessment tables, review tables, etc.

Teaching written discourse production started by working with the text since the comprehension questions housed the basic structural elements and organization of the text-type being taught. These made up the template that the student used to produce his/her own text.

In the activity directions there were clear references to the specific elements the student needed to check for in his/her text whenever he/she edited it. These referenced not only the basic structural elements, but the appropriateness of the linguistic means for the production of the specific text-type.

After the students produced their first text draft (minimum time allowance 20-minutes), the student checked this with the help of the respective review table provided. If the characteristics that comprised a good text were missing, he/she rewrote the portion or the whole text accordingly. The time allocated for the writing process and its assessment was about 2 teaching sessions.

Finally, the students had the opportunity to exchange their texts, with time allowed for discussion in the classroom. This enabled them to experience peer-assessment and to become aware of the error-types and gaps possible when producing a written text as well as to develop critical reading skills (metacognitive skills).

Generally, student's initiative was promoted with respect to the learning process. This was one of the purposes of including and promoting cross-thematic activities and designing projects.

## **Findings**

After a school-year long implementation period, regularly organized evaluation, the intervention objectives designed appear to have been achieved to a great extent.

Based on the testimonials of the participating teachers, the students developed the awareness that each text carries a communication message, is directed each time to different recipients and serves a different purpose. In other words, they understood that each linguistic expression is directed by the context of the extra linguistic situation within which it is being used. Thus, they learned that to communicate effectively, they have to take into consideration who is talking, to whom, for what purpose, where, when and why.

More specifically, with respect to the objectives of comprehension and the treatment of every type of authentic texts, the students were found to have made great progress. The students became familiar not only with literature texts but with the types of daily communication discourse prevalent in the social environment. They developed criteria related to what constitutes effective organization and writing of the

specific texts and their function in the social world/situation. They became aware of the composition strategies for a range of texts in conjunction with the different communication contexts.

The students also showed marked and significant results on the objectives dealing with discourse production. The differences observed in the quality and the quantity of the discourse produced was significant. We found that, because of the types of activities, the students produced written discourse all the time. The students used specified verbal codes for each communication event while also being aware of the fact that they were using them. They learned how to organize a text both in terms of its content as well as its form (clearly written, organized in paragraphs, etc.).

From the portfolio review, we saw that all students, in their first written productions failed to respect the restrictions and the conventions present in the particular text-type requested. By this we mean that in certain cases the students forgot to include pertinent information and in other cases they produced text-types that were totally different than those requested.

Moving onto the final written productions, we noted that all students exhibited distinctly improved understanding and production of the text-types requested. We also observed that they applied the appropriate conventions as needed. Moreover, the overall language achievement of the students summarily increased. The differences between first and final written productions are clear in terms of content as well as discourse in general.

The teachers pointed out that the construction of outlines for each text-type during the initial text comprehension and treatment procedures was particularly helpful. Furthermore, they said that use of self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques with the written discourse produced was especially effective in enhancing the student's knowledge and skills in terms of textual competence.

One of the most obvious differences in their behavior was that all the students wanted to express themselves in contrast to how they behaved prior to the intervention. They found the process of writing both interesting and pleasurable. They actively sought opportunities to compose text, to change it, or to replace it. In other words, they became proponents of the 'write, edit, rewrite' logic of writing as a process convention.

According to their teachers, this was the first time the students were observed *not* wanting to go out when the scheduled recess bell rang, if they hadn't completed their writing. There appeared to be no lapses in their attention to the tasks assigned. As the students commented, "This is the first time we're involved in things that have to do with our lives.";

"The activities are unique and we have fun doing them!"; "We've never before taken on the role of a reporter or an advertising designer and lots of other new and different experiences". It was also the first time these students asked for homework similar to the text development activities they had worked on in the classroom (hypothetical communication situations, role-playing and social interaction board games, taping and transcription of conversations, etc.).

The specific communicative situations resulted in students making use of the computer wherein they developed the ability to manage and handle information appropriately.

Implementation of a communicative-functional approach during the examination of the morphosyntactic phenomena was attempted within the specific environment of each text. The discourse was never isolated from its production conditions nor was the objective concerned solely with knowledge of but also with speech acts. The entire process was found to be particularly effective. We were able to note that student learning was achieved in a natural way through observation of their facility with texts similar to those studied. They did this by consolidating their knowledge of the phenomena studied. Furthermore, while they had approached the grammar textbook full of anxiety in the past, during the course of the program they acquired the habit of effortlessly using the textbook as well as other supplementary material. As a consequence of acquiring this familiarity and ease of use, the students also developed the knowledge and ability to use meta-linguistic terminology.

The results were equally as positive with respect to their reading and comprehension ability. The students acquired very good skimming and scanning skills which quickened the pace of their reading for information, information they later used to complete other activities.

Orthographic or spelling problems also decreased in a large percentage of the students. It is hypothesized that the major reasons for this are as follows:

- The students came into contact with a large number of texts.
- They continuously produced written discourse.
- They engaged in self-assessment as well as the peer-assessment of their work.
- They took part in activities that mimicked real as well as hypothetical communication situations which motivated them to be very careful of their work.
- They learned new and difficult words effortlessly and willingly through game like activities (crossword puzzles, hidden words, Scrabble, Hangman, Taboo, etc.).

Engagement in these game-like activities and their continuous use of the dictionary contributed as well to their expertise at vocabulary and semantic level. They also benefited from using the vocabulary in correspondence with different communication situations.

Significant is the fact that the students activated skills developed in the Language Arts course in other subject areas. To begin with they were comfortable in critically commenting on texts produced in other courses, identifying basic information from these texts, their structure, organization etc., summarizing and formulating definitions and problems. Secondly, they became adept at finding information from oral and written sources. They did not limit themselves to the instructional or reference materials provided but sought out and kept notes on information from dictionaries, encyclopedias, newspapers, magazines and other forms of printed material as well as from class lectures and discussions. These observations are not simply as a result of comments made by the teachers participating in the study but from colleagues who were engaged with the students in other subjects.

The teachers attributed great importance to the program success on the fact that it demanded group work. Cooperation, collaboration, involvement and discussion, based on rules, were important characteristics of the program. Rivalry between the opposing groups resulted in each group internally helping each member reach their highest potential.

In the program there were children for whom Greek was a Second language or children with learning disabilities that greatly benefited from participating in the program. In many instances the activities that all the students were engaged with constituted unique opportunities for these students to actively take part in discourse production. More generally, students who had been characterized as low achievers were found to have benefited from the program and with the conscious assistance and support of their peers.

The teachers commented on a program characteristic that they felt was guaranteed from the very beginning and that was considered a significant plus to the program. They stated that the types of material as well as the commensurate activities the students were exposed to guarantee the involvement of all the students, regardless of individual strengths and/or weaknesses. The text topics and game-like activities captured the interest and imagination of the students as they were taken from sources from their social environment.

Another point to be noted is that generally speaking the pedagogic climate in the classrooms improved. The teachers believed that the program greatly contributed to improving their pedagogic

practice since the methodology advanced the decentralization of the learning process and the changing of the role of teacher to one of designer-facilitator. Also helpful was the active attitude toward language which presupposed that the student did not simply reproduce but rather produced discourse as a speaker who made his/her opinion known and carried out his/her discussion based on rules.

The teachers supported that during the course of the program they acquired a facility in using new teaching techniques as well as criteria for assessing the student produced text as well as new ideas regarding the morphosyntactic phenomena. They expressed the conviction that they will be, from here on out, 'activists' promoting the communicative text-oriented approach to language teaching. They also supported that the ongoing in-service training and feedback that they received was fundamental to their acquisition of and facility with the new teaching techniques.

In terms of the difficulties encountered by the teachers implementing the program, the focus was on the significant amount of time needed to prepare for each teaching session, something that was very tiring. However, they were quick to point out that the results justified the process, in other words it was well worth the extra time they had to spend since the results were very satisfying.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Our study attempted to present a case for abandoning traditional teaching behaviors, in light of the previous studies conducted on the subject of written text production difficulties encountered by primary school children in Greece (see Kostouli, 1997, 1999, 2000; Papoulia-Tzelepi, 2000a,b; Papoulia-Tzelepi & Spinthourakis, 2000; Fterniati, 2001; Fterniati & Spinthourakis 2004). The problems the children encountered were not found on the sentence level and are not only a result of a lack of linguistic rule knowledge but also of a lack of awareness of basic parameters which determine the production of each specific text-type. Rather, they are a result of the different use of language for properly constructing an effective text.

To buttress our case for abandoning traditional language teaching approaches we designed and implemented a text-oriented teaching approach, predicated on the philosophy of communicative materials and instruction. Active participation and involvement of the teachers in the study with respect to their training and teaching strategy implementation was fundamental to the effective teaching of textual competence development. Furthermore, from the student's perspective we found that the comparative study of various authentic texts from the social enviro-



onment we live in, apparently helped the students understand the true value of textual communication. Exposure to and use of these materials by trained teachers provided models and focal points that enhanced the quality of students' written discourse. This exposure appears to have contributed to the improvement of written discourse. More specifically, an emphasis on enhancing their use of various strategies to produce specific and appropriate text-types appears to have been fundamental to the students' development of textual competence. As we have mentioned earlier and that was critical to the effort, was the systematic and continuing in-service training of the teachers taking part in the study. This is a key element in the implementation of any innovation.

Working through different types of texts using critical methods and using an extra-linguistic context for referencing while producing and processing various forms of text, appears to bolster students' ability to use discourse effectively. Thus, introducing appropriate communicative and interactive activities and allowing time for the processing of students' written discourse proved to be important for the broadening of their textual knowledge.

In this manner, the significant increase in achievement appears to indicate that the students,

when exposed to a text-oriented process in written discourse production, are made aware of the elements of and do in fact develop textual competence. This was especially marked in those groups exhibiting greater difficulty at the outset of the study. In reference to those students from different social environments, the increase in their achievement seems to be a direct result of their use of the research material and instructional practices adopted. Therefore, the text-oriented instructional material could be an especially effective factor in the improvement of the quality of written discourse.

Learning is not simply a matter of theoretical interest but of practical importance. The ability to handle the challenges of communicative and textual competence is something that comes from exposure to and interaction with the real and the meaningful. In conclusion, we posit that appropriately designed and piloted materials, continuing in-service instruction of educators as well as an informed and supportive school advisor can serve as a methodology facilitator towards the developing of textual competence in students. Together they create a frame within which the teaching praxis becomes, authentic and more effective.

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