Learning Argumentative Capacities

A Study of the Effects of a Systematic and Intensive Teaching of Argumentative Discourse in 11–12 Year Old Children

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ABSTRACT: In the fields of linguistics and psychology the didactic implementation of new knowledge relative to argumentative discourse and its acquisition has led us to develop a didactic sequence focused on the teaching of argumentation in 11–12 year old pupils. This sequence was experimented in six schools in order to assess the effect of these new educational methods on the capacities of pupils to treat the dialogic dimensions of argumentation in the writing of monologues. An analysis of the productions of the pupils who had been submitted to the didactic sequence, compared with those of a control group, showed a significant improvement in the capacities of the first group. These improvements concerned aspects such as backing up arguments, acknowledging the addressee, negotiating with an eventual contradictor and using of a certain number of units and linguistic expressions specific to argumentative texts (expressions of responsibility taking, textual organisers of cause and conclusion, modalisations of probability and of certitude, concessions and polite expressions).

KEY WORDS: Learning, argumentative capacities, concessions, argumentative discourse, backing up, polite expressions, modalisations, negotiation, textual organisers, production, didactic sequence

This research takes place in the continuity of the researches carried out these last years and which aimed at developing an efficient teaching method for writing texts (cf. Esperet, 1989; Garcia-Debanc, 1990; Schneuwly, 1990; Fijalkow, 1990; Halté, 1992). More specifically, it is part of a series of researches conducted in Geneva concerned with the assessment of the effect of a systematic and intensive teaching of different discursive genres on the written productions of the learners (cf. Dolz, Rosat and Schneuwly, 1991; Rosat, Dolz and Schneuwly, 1991; Dolz, 1992; Schneuwly, 1992). The results of these researches which concerned historical narrative genre, explicate-documentary genre and the description in a tourist guide book showed clearly significant improvements, after teaching, in the revision and rewriting of texts produced by the students. The improvements are specific to each of the discursive genres taught and concern mainly the dimensions addressed in the didactic sequences that were tested (either the communication aspects and the handling of textualisation or the aspects related to the planning and use of the textual schema). These improvements

also show, for a small number of students, text improvements related to punctual transfers from some of the dimensions studied explicitly to other textual dimensions for which the students had received no previous teaching.1

The research presented here addresses the teaching of argumentative discourse. The principal goal is to determine to what extent 11–12 pupils are able to improve their production of argumentative texts after being submitted to a collective systematic and intensive teaching concerning various dimensions of argumentative discourse.

This study comprises three separate aspects: 1) the didactic implementation of new knowledge and know-how pertaining to argumentative discourse according to the hypothesis that early teaching can lead to an improvement in argumentative capacities; 2) an experimental research carried out on the field in order to assess the effects of the didactic tools developed; 3) interpretation of the results (analysis of pupils productions before and after they received the teaching) and suggestions for the development of new teaching methods.

I. POSITIONING OF THE PROBLEM

An early teaching for the writing of argumentative texts

Several reasons concerning studies on the acquisition of discourse in the fields of psychology and didactic justify the choice of argumentative discourse among all others. It is news for no one that in the usual teaching method, the activities of reading and writing of narrative texts are predominant. It seems as if the work on debates comes necessarily after the practice of narration, whereas in fact these are two different kinds of discourse which could be introduced simultaneously from the beginning. Systematic teaching of argumentation is introduced rather belatedly at the end of mandatory schooling (14–15 years old), with results which many consider as unsatisfactory. The implicit hypothesis held by those who reduce the linguistic activities considered in primary school to narrative and descriptive genres is that there is a graduation-succession for the learning of these discursive genres. Such a perspective considers narrative texts to be accessible and attractive for pupils (cf. Fayol, 1987; Halté, 1992), explanation and argumentation are viewed as being more complex. According to this hypothesis, verbal interactive discourse serves as the basis for the development of narration which in turn becomes a basis for learning explanation and argumentation. These latter discursive forms are considered as appearing relatively tardily.

Yet, recent researches on discourse acquisition contradict this conception of the progression of learning relative to written language (cf. Dolz, Pasquier, Bronckart, 1993). First, each discursive genre comprises partic-