

# Applying Genre Theory to Improve Exposition-Type Essay Writing

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Received: 8 May 2009 / Accepted: 25 November 2009

ISSN: 1697-7467

**ABSTRACT:** The study reported in this paper focuses on the use of the Genre Theory in multilingual classrooms as an appropriate framework for English L2 writing. Our students' mother tongues were Spanish, Valencian, French, Flemish, Italian, German and Rumanian. The Genre Theory was applied to increase students' literacy skills through the study of text types and specific grammar structures that appear in these texts. As an adequate evaluation process had to be implemented, the computer programme *Markin*™ developed by Martin Holmes (1996-2002) was used to correct a corpus of 40 expositions written in English by students on the English Language IV course at the University of Alicante (Spain). *Markin*™ was used to classify and monitor the frequency of the types of specific structures used in exposition writing. In this study we intend to demonstrate that the combination of the Theory of Genre and the use of *Markin*™, helped students to improve their level of literacy.

**Key words:** Genre Theory, *Markin*™, expositions, academic writing, university teaching.

## Aplicar la teoría del género para mejorar la exposición de la escritura académica

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio se centra en el uso de la Teoría del Género en clases multilingües como un marco adecuado para la escritura del inglés como segunda lengua. Las lenguas maternas de nuestros estudiantes eran español, valenciano, francés, flamenco, italiano, alemán y rumano. La Teoría del Género se aplicó con el fin de mejorar las destrezas escritas de los estudiantes a través del estudio de textos y de estructuras gramaticales específicas que aparecen en estos textos. Como era necesario implementar un proceso de evaluación, el programa informático *Markin*™ desarrollado por Martin Holmes (1996-2002) fue empleado para corregir un corpus de 40 exposiciones escritas en inglés por estudiantes de la asignatura Lengua IV de la Licenciatura en Filología Inglesa en la Universidad de Alicante. *Markin*™ se empleó para clasificar los tipos estructuras que aparecen en las exposiciones. Este estudio pone de manifiesto que la combinación de la Teoría del Género y el uso de *Markin*™ contribuyó a que los estudiantes mejoraran su nivel de escritura.

**Palabras clave:** Teoría del Género, *Markin*™, exposición, escritura académica, enseñanza universitaria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus programme was established in 1987 and forms a major part of the European Union Socrates II programme. It is the European Commission initiative for higher education.

There are currently 2.199 higher education institutions participating in Erasmus across the 31 countries involved in the Socrates programme 1.4 million students have already taken part<sup>1</sup> (European Commission, 2006). The commonplace participation of students on Erasmus-Socrates exchange programmes has changed the composition of university classrooms in Europe. At the University of Alicante, the course English Language IV is often chosen by exchange students to continue their English studies abroad. This fact coupled with the linguistic policy of the region of the Comunitat València, where students can now study primary and secondary education in the less widely taught language of Valenciano, means that traditional L2 learning strategies for monolingual classrooms were no longer effective. Due to this, it became necessary to reconsider the methodology used in the classroom on this particular course for L2 writing. The students on the course now had varying English language levels from advanced to near native language skills. This difference in language level made it necessary to implement a more individualized learning process based on a sound theoretical basis such as the Genre Theory and the use of a mechanism to monitor individual progress throughout the course.

After observing literacy problems, we decided to use the Genre Theory so that students could see models of good writing and analyse textual structure, taking into consideration the cultural and social context of the texts. Thus, this study will highlight the importance of the Genre Theory as a very suitable theoretical framework for the development of proficient writing skills in multilingual classrooms since it plays a crucial role in literacy by concentrating on both the production and analysis of texts in a given language. The program *Markin*™ was used to accurately monitor the correction process and give feedback during the writing process. This was used to provide statistical evidence of individualised progress and provide results regarding the implementation of the theoretical framework.

The course English Language IV deals with academic writing for advanced students in English. In general, students have difficulty in the choice of vocabulary and grammatical patterns in L2 academic writing and many students do not associate the register or text type with specific structures. Thus, for example, there can be an almost complete absence of transitions in students' writings, or in other cases, more complex grammatical devices such as nominalisation are frequently not used. In the study reported in this paper the computer programme *Markin*™ developed by Martin Holmes is used to correct a corpus of 40 expositions written in English by students at the University of Alicante. The feedback mechanism was used to help students become aware that certain grammatical features are used in particular text types. In addition, the use of the computer programme was essential to monitor the writing process and to collect the data.

The breakdown of the expositions is as follows: 14 written by Spanish students (non-Valencian speaking Spanish students), 13 by students whose mother tongue was Valencian instead of Spanish (although Spanish was their second language), and 13 by Erasmus students whose native tongues were French, Italian, German, Flemish and Rumanian.

In this paper, we are interested in the different kinds of meaning through the potential of language from which writers and speakers can choose. Students should realize that when they create a text they have power because they can do things with their texts. In Halliday's words (1978:27): "Language, [...] is a potential: it is what the speaker can do".

1. Actual number of Erasmus students by country of home institution 1987/1988-2004-2005.

For this reason, we decided to use the Genre Theory as a theoretical framework. Genre Theory is a meaning based approach in which language is understood as a resource for making meaning and as a medium for learning academic language (Martin and Rose, 2008; Biber, 2006, Bruce, 2008). By genres we mean the different text types, following Paltridge (2006:84): “Genres are ways in which people ‘get things done’ through their use of spoken and written discourse”.

In this theoretical framework the role of context is essential in the interpretation of discourse. This shows the importance of a sociocultural perspective and highlights that writing cannot be studied in isolation from the context in which it occurs (Koutsantoni, 2007:19). As Wennerstrom (2003:34) puts it: “In a genre approach, the social and historical contexts of writing are given a higher priority: it is acknowledged that the conventions of written genres have a social history, having been developed in the context of a culture with communication needs and goals.”

The Genre approach has a crucial role in literacy since it concentrates on both the production and analysis of texts in a given language. It offers the tools for the analysis of grammatical features in written texts, such as: the different stages of texts, theme and rheme position, lexical choices (e.g. technical vocabulary, descriptive vocabulary, vocabulary of judgement or attitude), types of verbs, noun groups (including nominalization, extended noun groups), cohesion (types of conjunctions, types of reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion). This implies that teachers know the main formal and functional characteristics of each text type and the generic structure. As Hasan (1989:69) points out:

A teacher’s understanding of generic structures will be an active ingredient in his or her success as a teacher. Children need to be exposed to a wide range of genres—particularly those that are actively required in the educational process— for example, résumé, report, expository essay, and so on. It is a mistaken view of both text and learning to imagine that one can get children to write an essay on the relationship between climate and vegetation by simply talking about it: and it is worse still to imagine that one can do this without talking about it at all.

The topic of investigation consists in analysing how the combination of the Genre Theory and the use of the application called *Markin*™ helps to improve multilingual students’ written production by individualising the learning process. In the next section, we will present and illustrate with an example how we used the Genre Theory so that students could receive help and feedback during the writing process, see models of good writing and analyse textual structure, taking into consideration the cultural and social context of the texts, as well as observe how grammatical features cluster in particular text types.

We will highlight the main pedagogical implications of teaching taking the Genre Theory as a framework and the importance of using this approach to emphasize the relationship between texts and the context in which those texts occur. Then, we will describe how the use of *Markin*™, as an aid for correction and a basis for individualized tutorials, increased the individualization and the effectiveness of the learning process. Our research highlights the relationship between literacy, new technologies, and effective writing with an applied educational emphasis.

The purpose of doing a comparative study of the three groups of students (Spanish, Valencian and Erasmus) that attended the course English Language IV at the University of

Alicante is to study the progress of the three groups by assessing the range of structures used in expository writing. This would in turn indicate how successful the theoretical framework was in the learning process.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND MAIN STEPS IN THE RESEARCH

### 2.1. Classification of the main text types and their key grammatical features

With this research we intended to develop a “genre-based pedagogy” in our multilingual classrooms. As Drury (2004:233) highlights: “This pedagogy engages students in an interactive teaching/learning cycle where they acquire knowledge, understanding, practice in and feedback on the target genres and apply this in producing their own texts for particular purposes.” For this reason, we had to make decisions about what texts types we were going to use in our classroom practices and in what order they were going to be introduced (Hubbard and Levy, 2006:11; Wennerstrom, 2003:3).

As Hubbard and Levy (2006:11) point out: “Teachers need to know why they do what they do, using pedagogical approaches that are intentional and well-considered. They need to be able to make informed judgements on the suitability of the tool for the task [...]”. Consequently, we decided to work with expositions that presented arguments using structures of examples, comparison and contrast. This helped the students associate the grammatical structures most commonly used in expositions with this text type.

When students are able to analyse the main features of the main text types, they can predict the context of the text, and at the same time they learn to use these grammatical features in their written texts and improve their level of literacy. In Martínez Lirola’s words (2006:149): “This is essential so that students can see how members of a culture use written texts as part of their social lives and they can conclude that the purpose of a genre determines its shape, i.e., its schematic structure”.

In order to implement the approach based on the Genre Theory, students were exposed to expositions and the specific features that would form part of the structure of an exposition. The specific skills included writing development by examples, comparison and contrast. It was necessary to bring to the forefront the grammatical features of example texts that show comparison instead of contrast or the features which would constitute development by example. For example, students were unaware that comparisons often implied the use of transitions such as *too*, *also*, etc. while contrast implied the use of different transitions such as, *however*, *in contrast*, etc. Therefore, students were asked to observe the main grammatical features in sample texts and write their own texts following the stages and linguistic patterns found in the models seen in class. Students were then assigned writings (paragraphs) in which they had to use the three different techniques for exposition writing, i.e., examples, comparison and contrast. These paragraphs were corrected and commented on before the students moved on to a larger writing assignment which meant a full exposition on a topic of their choice.

The following table shows a full exposition example text given to students in order to observe an example of a good exposition; it is about two modern leaders: Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King. The table offers an outline of the information offered in the text: the thesis, the different arguments and the main grammatical features.

Table 1. Full exposition example text (Imhoof and Hudson, 1975: 35-36).

<b>Thesis</b> Two 20 <sup>th</sup> century leaders	Different races and cultures Opposite side of the world Similar philosophies Expended their lives in social action	<b>Main grammatical features of expositions</b>
<b>Argument 1</b> <b>Family backgrounds</b>	Ghandi broke with family tradition Studied in England, retained Hindu religion King kept family tradition, became minister Studied philosophy, including Gandhi , formed his own philosophy	Use of nominalization  Use of technical nouns in the evidence (formality of language)  Thinking (sensing) verbs to express opinion in an explicit way
<b>Argument 2</b> <b>Ideology of non-violence</b>	Gandhi said refuse to obey immoral law Must not harm oppressors King said he hoped no one would die Love one's enemies	Varying degrees of modality to express opinion  Use of evaluative vocabulary
<b>Argument 3</b> <b>Plans for social action</b>	Gandhi wanted independent India King wanted justice in America Gandhi encouraged economic independence and cultural solidarity King encouraged the same for Black Americans	Transitions
<b>Reinforcement of thesis</b> <b>Similarities between Gandhi and King</b>	Influential leaders Family backgrounds Times of non-violent resistance In service to their people	

A previous study in CALL and the Genre Theory (Martinez and Tabuenca, 2008) has shown that a combined application of CALL and the Genre Theory are effective in the English L2 classroom where the students have the same native language. This, however, may not be the case in more specific English L2 academic writing situations nor with students from multilingual backgrounds. The more complex needs of the students and the difficulty of not being able to rely on a common first language for error sources would have to be replaced by the increased autonomy of the learners and the use of the Genre Theory which would serve as a basis for the writing needs of the students.

From the examples studied in class, students should be able to deduce that the main grammatical features in expositions are the following (Droga and Humphrey, 2003:144; for the linguistic features of expositions see also Painter, 2001:170). We also added the use of transitions as this was a particularly difficult area for the students:

- Use of nominalization
- Use of technical nouns in the evidence (formality of language)
- Thinking (sensing) verbs to express opinion in an explicit way
- Varying degrees of modality to express opinion
- Use of evaluative vocabulary
- Transitions

For this reason, following the Genre Theory implies offering students good examples of different genres or text types so that they can observe the different stages in the construction of the text. After that, students should be asked to observe the main grammatical features in the text under analysis, and write their own texts following the stages and linguistic patterns found in the model.

## 2.2. The Use of *Markin*© in the Classroom

The study aimed to help multilingual students acquire autonomy in the analysis of their own written work and aid the teacher in monitoring their progress by making use of the accurate statistical information the correction process provided. Therefore, it was necessary to use a programme that could not only correct but also store the types of structures the students should be applying in their expositions and then generate statistical information.

Autonomy in this study means identifying possible good structures as well as the absence of structures or incorrect structures. It was then the responsibility of the students to apply the knowledge gained from the class samples to their corrections.

For this reason, it was necessary to take into consideration that the use of *Markin*'© implies a change in the teachers' roles. As Pérez Gutiérrez and Pérez Torres (2005:576) highlight: "In fact, computers are a powerful tool which can replace the teacher's role of instructor on many occasions and help students become more autonomous [...]". In our case, the programme became a tool to help guide the students in applying the Genre Theory in their own expositions and a form of monitoring this process for the teachers.

Following Martínez Lirola (2007:34), the traditional roles of teachers consist of being a sort of knowledge source and controlling every aspect of the teaching-learning process. Using this programme and the methodology implied favours new roles of teachers in the language classroom, such as the following: guide and facilitator of the learning process, manager, giver of information based on his/her own experience, researcher in order to improve the learning process, evaluator of students' work, and motivator (Martínez Lirola, 2007:35-36,38).

This change in teachers' roles goes together with a change in students' roles, since students are requested to have more responsibility in their own learning process. As Hubbard (2004:45) points out: "A fundamental quandary in CALL is that learners are increasingly required to take a significant amount of responsibility for their own learning, whether that learning is taking place through the programmed teaching presence in tutorial software or the unstructured spaces of the world wide web."

As our students came from different linguistic backgrounds, it was inevitable that they would have different levels of language ability and a greater need for individual learning. The use of CALL, specifically the programme *Markin*'© in this research, would help to contribute to a much more active role in the learning process that students play nowadays.

To this end, the programme *Markin*© was chosen to aid in the correction process of the students' expositions. This computer programme permits the correction of texts and the subsequent storage of the texts as computer files, as well as providing statistical information regarding the types and number of structures. It allows for the creation of specific buttons within the correction code button set that were then used to identify the correct use, incorrect use or absence of structures that should have appeared in the expositions. Figure 1 below is a sample of the edition possible for the correction code buttons that are part of the programme.

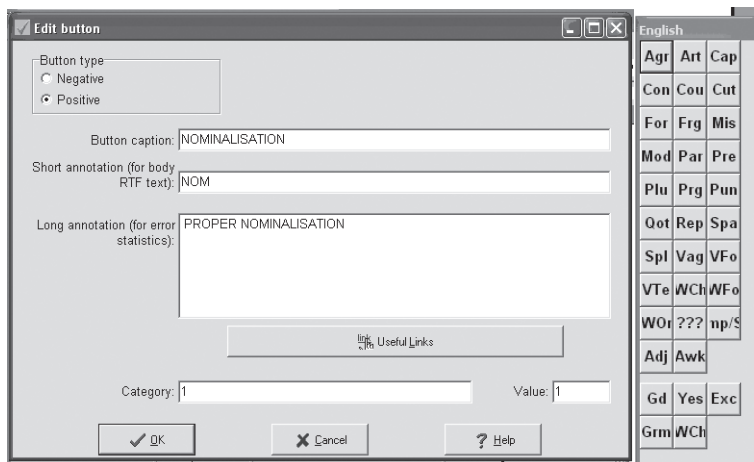


Figure 1. Correction code button edit and sample button set.

As stated previously, the programme allows the teacher to identify the problematic areas in students' writings. The students would send a Word file which was then uploaded onto the interface and, with the help of the correction button set, the teacher marked the text. The button set was modified to allow us to name not only grammar elements that are usually corrected but also the elements (nominalisation, transitions, etc.) that we were looking for and then total the quantity and the appropriateness of use. The programme permits the user to underline the word or fragment and to create a link. Once the students click on the underlined section, a window pops up and shows the students the appropriate code.

The programme also tabulates the number and types of errors and presents these in a table form at the bottom of the essay. Once corrected, these texts were then sent via e-mail to the students. When the students opened the file, as the labels of the underlined section are interactive, they could look at these words/phrases in more detail. The next step was the re-reading and correction of the text following the indicators of the *Markin*© programme. To motivate students and aid them in comprehending their errors and correcting them, they were encouraged to come to a follow-up individual tutorial where the annotations were discussed.

### 2.3. The role of individual tutorials in students' autonomous learning and motivation

Although there is a running debate on the need for and the most effective types of feedback for L2 writing (Ferris, 2004; Bitchener et al. 2005), studies have shown that students

do desire feedback on their writing. In general, students desire form focused feedback on their writing (Ferris, 2005). However, part of the debate centres on the fact that language correction may not always be as effective as desired by teachers because students have difficulty in using corrective feedback (Truscott, 1996; Hyland, 2003).

This has been resolved by further studies in which many teachers regard teacher –student tutorials / meetings to be more effective than only written feedback as it provides the student with the possibility of individualized instruction (for further explanation of errors and discussion see, Ferris 2002; Ferris and Hedgcock, 1998). Therefore, as there were only 40 students in total in the control group this made it possible to hold individualised tutorials after the computer correction process regarding the paragraphs and the full exposition essays.

Students were asked to come to individualised tutorials where the marked essays were discussed and feedback was given in a one-to-one tutorial. Students were encouraged to come with their own ideas and corrections to the text and these were discussed and at times debated so that the student would feel more motivated and part of the correction process (Martínez Lirola and Crespo, 2008). In this way, students became more aware of the structures associated with the text type and learned to use the linguistic resources more confidently as their individual queries were dealt with. This combination of written and oral feedback allowed the group to be monitored more closely as well as including the students in the corrections process.

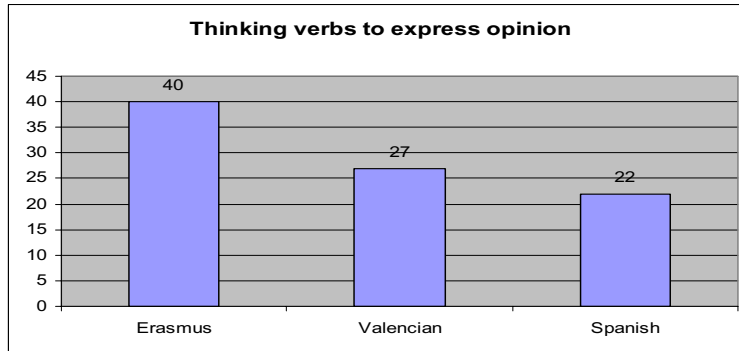
### 3. RESULTS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The six tables on the following pages are the result of the statistical information provided by the programme *Markin*© where the rate of the adequate use of the main grammatical features in the 40 final expositions is highlighted. It must be noted that the main grammatical features were found in most of the texts regardless of the mother tongue of the students. This reflects the fact that the use of the adequate models was effective in the student's acquisition and application of the main linguistic features in exposition writing. However, it is interesting to note that the lowest rates occurred within the Spanish and Valencian student groups in contrast to the Erasmus group, in which there was an elevated use of all the linguistic features. The initial language level of the Spanish and Valencian students or the bilingual versatility of the Erasmus students may have had an effect on the statistics; this is an area for further study. Another general comment concerns the length of the expositions. The students were given a minimum number of words but not a maximum. On average, the Spanish and Valencian students did not surpass the minimum word limit, however the Erasmus students on average wrote longer expositions. This led to a greater number of features available in the expositions by the Erasmus students.

An overview of the first three tables shows low rates of these grammatical features in general. This absence could indicate apprehension on the part of the students to voice their ideas strongly, thereby choosing to use more neutral language. This also means that there were fewer structures of this nature on the whole.

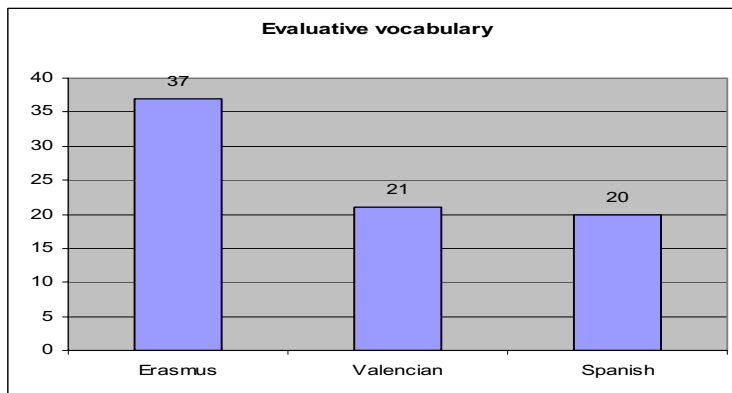


Table 2. Use of thinking verbs to express opinion in expositions.



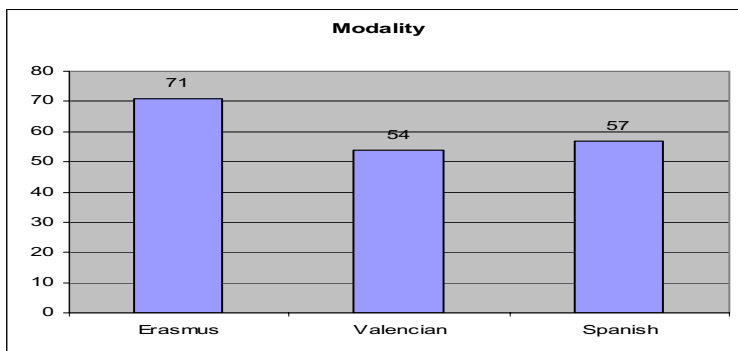
In Table 2, Erasmus students make twice as much use of thinking verbs as Spanish students. Students had studied and were aware of the use of thinking verbs to express opinion; however, many of the Spanish and Valencian students preferred to use more passive constructions or to hardly use this structure in the main body of the text. This structure was usually used either at the very beginning or the very end of the exposition. The Erasmus students in contrast used this structure more often and in more varied positions.

Table 3. Use of evaluative vocabulary in expositions.



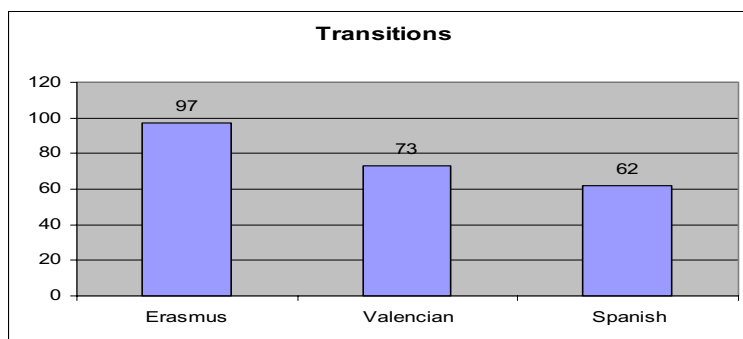
In general, the use of evaluative vocabulary was low in the expositions analysed. Students were aware of this feature but did not seem comfortable using it. In general, sentences were formulated in neutral structures which did not encourage the use of evaluative vocabulary. This is interesting as the students showed a reluctance in general to evaluate the information.

Table 4. Use of modality in expositions.



Surprisingly the use of modality was higher than that of the previous two grammatical features. This structure was mostly found in the body of the text and was used with the same frequency in the case of the Spanish and Valencian speakers. The Erasmus students used this structure slightly more on average; however, this result is due to the length of the expositions of the Erasmus students, which provided more examples of this feature. Interestingly, the increased use of modality ties in directly with the hesitancy to voice an opinion clearly; structures such as: *could be*, *might*, etc. were the most commonly used. This could reinforce the idea that students are apprehensive about defending their opinions and this would be an interesting area for further study.

Table 5. Use of transitions in expositions.



There was a good and varied use of transitions in most of the expositions marked; however, the Erasmus students used intrasentencial and intersentencial transitions whereas in the majority of cases the Spanish and Valencian used mostly intersentencial transitions. This is an area for further study as it could indicate differing language levels between the groups and thus differing abilities in the writing process.

Table 6. Use of nominalisations in expositions.

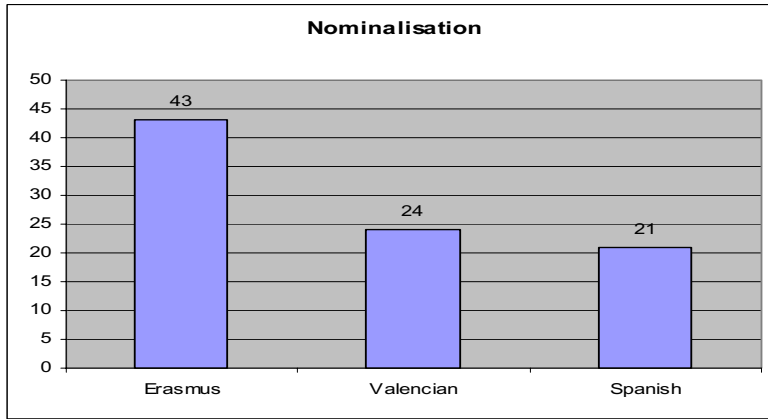


Table 6 shows the difficulty that students have in general with nominalisation. This structure was infrequently used and only appears to be more frequently used by the Erasmus students, due to the longer length in general of the expositions written by them. This may indicate the necessity to focus more upon this skill in general in the classroom.

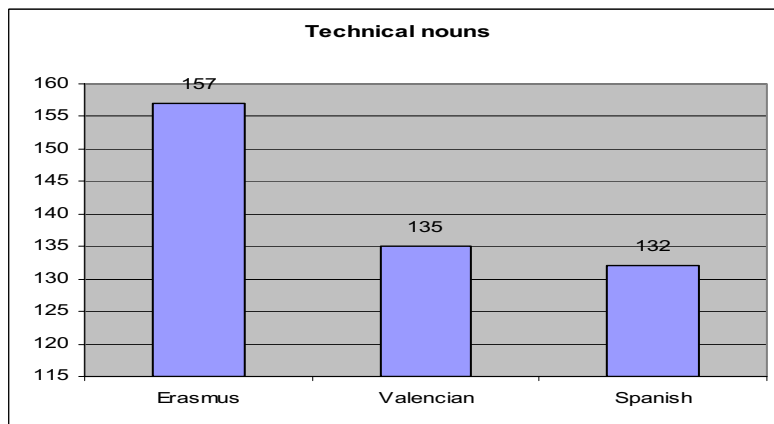


Table 7. Use of technical nouns in expositions.

Lastly, it can be seen that the use of technical nouns was quite high as the students had chosen topics that required specific vocabulary and rather than use nominalisations, students in general preferred repetition of vocabulary. This reflects the language ability of all the students and indicates that this is another area that would need more attention in the classroom.

On the whole, the results of the study show an adequate use of the grammatical features appropriate to exposition writing, however, the different mother tongues of the students did

affect the individual rates of production of the grammatical features. The lowest rates were recorded for: thinking (sensing) verbs which express an opinion in an explicit way, varying degrees of modality to express opinion and the use of evaluative vocabulary. This may indicate that students in general do not feel comfortable with expressing their opinions strongly or that these features are more difficult to assimilate and then apply in their own writings. This is an area for further study. The rate of transitions and technical nouns used reflects the formality of the structure of expositions. Students felt comfortable with these features and the higher rates highlight this fact. However, the use of nominalisation was low in contrast to the use of technical nouns, which shows that students in general preferred to repeat structures rather than transform grammatical features. This may indicate that this structure needs more work in the classroom as it is a difficult feature to assimilate and to apply. Lastly, the constant higher rates for the Erasmus students in all of the features are a further area of study. The different mother tongues of the students affected the individual rates of production of the grammatical features. More detailed studies on larger groups are necessary to clarify some of the results obtained in this preliminary study.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The combination of the programme *Markin*'© and the Genre Theory in the multilingual classroom has provided interesting results. The use of the Genre Theory gave students the opportunity of studying the purposes of different genres and how genres use different language and grammatical structures to accomplish their purposes. Students were able to apply this knowledge in their expositions as they became aware of the impact of language choices in the way this text type is elaborated.

The use of the computer programme *Markin*'© to correct students' essays and the follow-up tutorials has allowed us to guide this progress and has given the students a monitored and personalised writing process. This is instrumental in multilingual classrooms where progress differs greatly and students need greater motivation to reach their potential.

Moreover, the use of the computer programme gave the students autonomy and it also led to more personal interaction with the students in their writing process. This individualization of the learning process was crucial in the multilingual group because we took into consideration the different levels of language proficiency between learners and how this could affect their acquisition of specific writing skills for expositions following the Genre Theory.

The use of *Markin*'© also demonstrated that the students have an increased motivation when a programme allows them to be part of the marking process and encouraged more profound reflection on the use of specific grammatical structures, which helped their learning process, in which the individualised tutorials played a key role. Consequently, the use of the programme in combination with the Genre Theory clearly contributed to improving the students' writing skills because the Genre Theory focuses on the organization and content of discourse, addressing explicitly the linguistic and structural differences in a variety of genres; it provides opportunities for the study of grammar and lexis in context.

With the Genre Theory, teachers and students must realize that as speakers of a language we do not speak or write independent sentences but produce texts according to the context

in which we are interacting. This approach contrasts with our previous experiences of teaching writing in the same subject when students were asked to produce texts without being exposed to good models of written texts; students were not taught about the different genres or text types; the teaching of writing was focused on the formal aspects of the written text, which implied that the functional aspects were ignored; and the idea of context and its relationship with the written text was neglected, i.e., students were not taught that the linguistic characteristics of a text help readers to predict its context.

Finally, after this study, we can state that students became aware of the different meaning potentials (all the choices that can be made) inside a culture, and exhibit varied degrees of control over the meaning potential of English because we give them the opportunity of using this language in different situations, always taking into consideration the different contexts. In other words, the Genre Theory can help students to understand the relationships between language use, culture and society. Moreover, students observed that language use is crucial in shaping the different types of context in which it is used.

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