

# ISSA Proceedings 2014 - The Matrix For The 21st Century Russian Education

*Abstract:* The paper deals with the problem of argumentation literacy in the field of modern Russian education. We carry out the analysis of argumentation that university students put forward while writing argumentative essays as a part of their final English test. The analysis concerns papers written by students at different exam levels: B2, C1. The command of English at these levels differs a lot and the analysis is aimed at revealing connection between students' language ability and their argumentative ability.

*Keywords:* Argumentative ability, CEFR, language competences, B2/C1 students.

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the study of relations between students' argumentative ability and their foreign language ability and in particular, that part of relations that has to do with the skill to produce arguments in a foreign language (English in our research) and the level of the English language competence. The study makes use of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse that unites normative and descriptive approaches to the argumentation. We start with some background information concerning the changes in educational approach to foreign language teaching that are being carried out in the field of Russian language education. Then we present the results of students' essays analysis and finally make some conclusions.

## 2. Educational shift towards competences

The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what skills language learners have to acquire in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop to be able to act effectively. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency that allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.

The Council of Europe is concerned to improve the quality of communication

among Europeans of different language and cultural backgrounds. This is because better communication leads to freer mobility and more direct contact, which in turn leads to better understanding and closer co-operation.

The main document produced by the Council of Europe is the CEFR, the chief goal of which can be formulated as the following: "The Common European Framework is intended to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe" (CEFR, 2001, p. 1). Recently created Language Testing Centre of Saint Petersburg State University has developed its own tests that are currently going through the process of being linked to the CEFR. That means that a group of international experts are analyzing the above-mentioned tests developed by the university experts in terms of their compliance with the CEFR requirements.

According to the CEFR language use embracing language learning comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and particular language competences with the special emphasis on communicative competence. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities. The production and receiving verbal messages in various situations imply both the diversity of themes covering specific topical domains and communicative relations between interlocutors. Activating strategies relevant to functional approach seems most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished in general education (CEFR, 2001, p. 9)

Thus, we can say that modern educationalists regard forming competences as one of the main goals of foreign language teaching. Competences are regarded as a sum of knowledge, skills, abilities behavioral rituals that allow a person to perform actions. In our study we are interested mainly in communicative language competence that comprises several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. If we look at the definitions of the above competences given in the CEFR, we will get the following:

Linguistic competences include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system.

Sociolinguistic competences refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use.

Pragmatic competences are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges.

All these competences are necessary for encouraging learners to organize argumentative speech in a foreign language in both learning situations and natural communicative situations. Argumentative foreign language competences are concerned with argumentative ability of the person and comprise the ability to present a viewpoint in a foreign language drawing on linguistic devices, to put forward arguments for or against a particular standpoint, to sequence arguments in a logical way and to present arguments organizing them in argumentative structures.

We think that these competences should be included in pragmatic competences as an important component in the course of foreign language teaching.

### *3. Argumentation literacy*

The problem of argumentation literacy in the field of Russian education has become urgent with the introduction of the United State Exam in Russian comprehensive secondary school. School students are encouraged to use some of argumentation schemes in foreign language writing and speaking. However, the level of present Russian school foreign language interaction concerns more explanation of the speaker's standpoint rather than argumentation. The level of higher education requires a more sophisticated approach to argumentation education incorporating different levels of language proficiency and knowledge in special professional fields. With State Saint Petersburg University's joining the Bologna process aimed at the creation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) the urgency of argumentation literacy has become even higher.

As far as Russia is concerned we can say that practical argumentation education was mostly developed in business schools and foreign languages in most cases came as a subsidiary instrument used for verbal socializing. Moreover, the model of the adult world reflected in the language is connected with certain stereotypes, which should be taken into account and are presently covered by the culture-studies as speech habits and rituals in quickly changing present-day communication. The concept of the stereotype can be seen as a phenomenon that

covers social aspect of communication practice and a rhetorical one. In the first case the recurrence of social situations is important which can be used in educational case settings, whereas the rhetorical aspect provides the genre of argumentative dialogue. Both aspects are relevant for argumentation literacy.

Second and foreign language teaching is often based on the assumption that learners have already acquired a knowledge of the world sufficient for the purpose participating in argumentative dialogue. This is, however, not always the case and we think that is definitely not the case when we are talking about argumentative ability of the learner of a foreign language. It is really difficult to put your message across to other people in a foreign language and far more difficult to convince them.

The learner may well argue in his/her mother tongue and we tend to extrapolate his/her ability into a foreign language. Understanding the stereotypes and the fact that people communicate and listen differently is a part of argumentation and language teaching.

As J. Harmer noted 'language teaching...reflects the times it takes in. Language is about communication...Teaching and learning are very human activities; they are social just as much as they are linguistic' (Harmer, 2011, p. 9).

### 3.1 *CEFR criteria*

The aim of the present study is to carry out the analysis of argumentation that university students put forward while writing argumentative essays that are an obligatory part of their final test in English. First we discuss basic criteria for two levels (B2 and C1) and then cover the comparative argumentation analysis connected with their language skills.

New requirements for English as a foreign language have recently been adopted for university students. According to these requirements all university graduates should possess B2 in English. Those students who entered university with B2 should sit English exam at C1 level. Thus, university graduates may be either B2 or C1 students. We conducted a comparative analysis of essays written by students at different exam levels: B2 and C1 according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). The required performance of English at these levels differs a lot and we believe that the argumentation competence may also differ. CEFR criteria at the target levels B2 and C1 are the following:

B2 students can write an essay or report, which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail. Examples: Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesize information and arguments from a number of sources. Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints and develop arguments without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.

C1 students can select an appropriate formulation from a broad range of language to express him/herself clearly, without having to restrict what he/she wants to say. Examples: Can write clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples.

### *3.2 B2 students' argumentative ability*

Argumentation scheme for the analysis is taken from the pragma-dialectical approach. In pragma-dialectical approach (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993) natural argumentative discourse models were described through normative models, which allow incorporating normative models of dialogue and different types of communicative activity in some particular situational settings.

The analysis shows that students presenting their essays at B2 level demonstrate the following argumentative abilities and competences. They can indicate standpoints and produce mainly utilitarian arguments. They employ the limited range of language to express standpoints. The examples of the expressions are the following:

1. In my opinion, I personally think, I agree, I consider, I'm inclined to believe, I believe, I think, I feel, as far as I am concerned, my personal opinion is, from my point of view.

The most common way to indicate standpoint at this level is to indicate it explicitly by using personal pronouns and explicit linguistic markers as can be seen from given examples.

The analysis also reveals that at this level of language competence students use two main types of arguments: 1. personal, utilitarian, beneficial; students appeal

to positive concepts of “goodness”; 2. arguments to popular opinion. Let us look at the example of utilitarian argumentation. The standpoint that is defended is expressed explicitly with the clear linguistic marker. The argumentation can be reconstructed as subordinately compound:

2. Standpoint: In my opinion, it is very useful for young people to move to another city to study

Argument 1: Studying far away from home gives students not only an academic knowledge but also a great life experience.

Sub-argument 1: These skills make young people more successful, self-confident and clever. Sub-argument 2: It makes students to become independent from their parents.

There is one argument that is backed up by two sub-arguments. All the arguments that are put forward to defend the standpoint are mainly utilitarian and beneficial and closely connected with the personal life experience of the arguer. A special type concerns causal relations.

Given examples show that the arguer cannot alienate himself/herself from his/her own self. It is revealed in the concepts to which he/she appeals: life experience, independence, success, self-confidence. We can consider some more examples of personal utilitarian arguments:

3. Standpoint: Some people think that participating in a reality show can be a valuable life experience (we retain original grammar and spelling)

Argument: I agree with this statement, as this kind of experience may be very useful.

4. Standpoint: The Internet is very useful thing.

Arguments: 1. it can help us to find information, 2. it connects people around the world, we can chat how much we want.

5. Standpoint: In my opinion, people should communicate face to face.

Arguments: 1. a human will feel himself better if he communicates really not with Internet. 2. Live communication will help us to understand other people, their problems, interests. 2.1. By this way you can find friends easier and faster. 3. Walking with friends is also good for mind.

All these examples of utilitarian argumentation reveal that at B2 level students (in

the majority of cases) cannot alienate themselves from their personal experience and put forward arguments that are closely linked with their knowledge of the world. Thus, they act as naïve arguers and draw heavily from their knowledge of the world that was formed mainly by their environment (school, family, friends etc.).

### 3.3 C1 students' argumentative ability

The argumentation scheme used by C1 level students is a little bit different. The analysis shows a definite ability of students to alienate themselves from their personal experience and produce more abstract and impersonal arguments. These types of arguments are presented in a more orderly way and they are more explicit. The created argumentative scheme reflects standpoints are becoming more varied and the point of view is expressed more eloquently. Although the functional register of verbal stereotypes is still egocentric as in utilitarian argumentation, the indicators reflecting introductory level of argumentation show the confidence of the speaker : I cannot deny, I would like to say, that's why I am sure etc.

C1 level students more often introduce their standpoints without explicit verbal indicators, which is not the case with B2 students. The latter prefer to express their standpoints explicitly or present a certain proposition as a generally accepted idea such as 'some people think'. According to F. Eemeren, P.Houtlosser and F.Henkemans "When a proposition is presented as generally accepted or irrefutable... this implicates that the other party cannot escape from accepting that proposition as a shared starting point" (Eemeren, Houtlosser & Henkemans, 2007, p. 105). B2 students act as 'naïve' arguers and make use of the tools they would have used arguing in their mother tongue, for it seems safer to stick to generally accepted ideas.

Students presenting their essays at C1 level also often use compound sentences to introduce standpoints. Here are some examples of different ways to present a standpoint:

6. Nowadays globalization not only affects world economy and culture but also changes people's everyday experiences.

7. To my mind globalization would not change the world for the better.

C1 level students when using utilitarian argumentation connect arguments with

usefulness for the community and society in general rather than with their personal experience... Thus at this level utilitarian argumentation becomes more impersonal. This can be illustrated with the following examples:

8. One more argument for globalization is that it benefits everyone, not only big corporations but also people in developing countries, as it provides them with job places.

9. It (globalization) offers new opportunities for travel, work and education and of course for communication.

In terms of argumentation schemes students at C1 level demonstrate the ability to use regressive presentation (which is not the case at B2 level students who prefer the progressive presentation). The arguer puts forward arguments and then expresses his/her opinion.

10. Companies tend to become more productive and competitive thereby raising the quality of goods, services and the standards of living, that's why I am sure that term globalization is definitely about progress.

One more argument type of C1 level students' argumentation is connected with the binary oppositions. Unlike the schemes reflecting specific relations between a premise and standpoint opposites are patterns that can be abstracted from any particular content. A binary opposition deals with the aspect of categorization.

Modern global world is full of opposites that could be defined through diverse categories - good opposes bad, big opposes small, right opposes left, night opposes day, old opposes young, and globalists oppose anti-globalists. These oppositions create society's beliefs and misconceptions of what is good and what is bad, or what is ethical and non-ethical, and from a young age we subconsciously conform to these without even knowing it, and even as adults we continue creating these oppositions in our minds when processing fact evaluation of facts. A binary opposition is a pair of opposites that powerfully form and organize human thought and culture. Binary opposition is so deeply rooted in thinking patterns that we cannot even escape it. The concept of binary opposition is in use almost always whether we realize it or not (Goudkova & Tretyakova, 2010, p. 657).

C1 level students use binary oppositions to present their arguments thus directing



the vector of argumentation to the positive concepts when defending a standpoint and to the negative concepts when putting arguments against a standpoint. Here are arguments that students put forward arguing for and against globalization.

Arguments for:

11. When the nations have “one world, one vision”, the same political and economic interests, it helps them to live in peace - appellation to the concept of “peace”.

12. Globalisation encourages better standards for the environment - appellation to the concept of “environment protection”.

13. Globalisation gives us many communication advances such as e-mail, mobile phones, social networks, skype - appellation to the concept of “easy and better communication”.

Arguments against:

14. Globalisation results in destruction of cultural diversity - appellation to the concept of “destruction”.

Counter-argumentation refers to negative concepts, e.g.:

15. The great number of employees from developing countries creates such a competition that multinational companies could easily exploit the workers setting unfairly low wages.

The negative concepts to which the arguer appeals are the concept of exploitation and the concept of injustice.

Thus, we can specify the following features of C1 level in argumentation: a regressive presentation of argumentation, alienation from personal experience in utilitarian argumentation scheme, a greater number of verbal expressions reflecting introductory level of argumentation and the use of opposites as a specific pattern.

#### *4. Conclusion*

In conclusion it may be stated the matrix for the argumentative analysis of foreign-language essay writing can be effectively carried out with the help of pragma-dialectics. Critical argumentation is a practical skill that needs to be

taught, from the very beginning, through the use of real or realistic examples of arguments of the kind that the user encounters in everyday life (Walton, 2006, p. xi)

The analysis of B2 and C1 students' essays shows that Russian students writing in English may know the basics of argumentation but they cannot use it properly, as they are not proficient enough in the L2 language. They start using arguments when they become more skilled in the language and the results show that that is achieved at C1 level. At all these levels of language competence the type of argumentation in a foreign language is connected with the concept of stereotyping as a multi-dimensional activity that creates a communication frame of critical discussion and a range of indicators for presenting arguments.

Results obtained show that students act as naïve arguers in Russian environment because of the lack of basics of argumentation theoretical technique. They produce their arguments on intuition, which tells more about the speaker/ writer than about effective arguments.

Argumentation competences should be incorporated into the university curriculum to provide students with basic concepts and practices. Argumentation appears to correlate with innate properties of the student's mind. The more advanced in the language (English) students become the more independently from their personal experience and more impersonal their arguments are. Thus, the higher language competence the more abstract arguments become. We can conclude that there is strong correlation between language competence and argumentative competence.

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