

Beteckning _____



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An international comparative study on English
writing proficiency in two secondary school settings

Aitor Villanueva
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Handledare: Oliver St. John

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world with English as a lingua franca, European countries are competing in their efforts for their populations to speak English. The main goal of this study was to compare the English writing proficiency of one class in the Basque Country and one in Sweden at the end of their compulsory education. Both classes took an essay test in which verb use, conjunction use, spelling and text length were measured. The Swedish students outperformed their Basque counterparts in almost every measured area, which was suggested to be due to a combination of teacher-related factors (methodology, command of the language, use of the language and learning environment) and external factors (language typology, language input and student motivation). The teaching skills and command of English of Basque teachers should be improved as well as audiovisual tools and communicative approach introduced in order to compensate for the lack of language input and language use possibilities.

Keywords: writing, EFL, comparative, English, compulsory education, proficiency, European, Basque, Swedish

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Aim.....	5
1.2 Structure.....	5
1.3 Concepts.....	6
2. Previous research.....	8
3. Method.....	11
3.1 Choice of method.....	11
3.2 Choice of essay.....	13
3.3 Choice of features.....	14
3.3.1 Verbs.....	15
3.3.2 Connectors: conjunctions.....	15
3.3.3 Spelling.....	17
3.3.4 Text Length.....	17
3.4 Background and Method Implementation.....	18
3.4.1 School B.....	18
3.4.2 School S.....	18
3.4.3 Method Implementation.....	19
3.5 Lesson Observation.....	20
3.5.1 School B.....	20
3.5.2 School S.....	22
3.6 Limitations.....	23
4. Results and analysis.....	25
4.1 Conjunctions.....	26
4.2 Verbs.....	30
4.3 Text length.....	32
4.4 Spelling mistakes.....	33
4.5 General analysis.....	34
5. Conclusion.....	38
6. Appendixes.....	41
References.....	46

1. Introduction

‘Writing is a way of talking without being interrupted’ (Jules Renard)

The process known as “globalization” has increased the need for communication at a speed and at a reach unimaginable just 20 years ago and with the help of the Internet, computers and cell phones, we are being brought together politically, culturally, socially and economically. Eating a kiwi picked in New Zealand, chatting with somebody in Colombia and moving out to Spain for work are natural things that nobody raises an eyebrow for anymore.

This reality puts new demands, one of which is the English language. English has established itself as the new lingua franca of the world (Ives, 2006:121-122) and has become an invaluable tool that grants access to professional and academic opportunities, literature, sports, movies, TV, music, games and an expanded social life with people from all around the world. Languages in general have now gained so much recognition that EU’s goal is for every European citizen to speak two European languages besides their own.

Writing is the other globalization demand. From being exclusive property of cultural and administrative elites in Ancient and Medieval times, and until its generalization among the population in the 19th-20th centuries, writing has been slowly increasing in importance. Writing is of so great value in our western society that it is nowadays one of the central goals of the school system because unlike oral language, written language is not naturally acquired but it has to be consciously studied. As Raimés (cited in Wahlström, 2006:3) puts it: ‘An integral part of participating fully in a new cultural [language] is learning how to communicate when the other person is not right in front of us’.

Furthermore, good reading and writing skills are needed to access knowledge and cope with the school system first and a professional life later. In fact, with literacy rates above 90% in all developed countries, being illiterate is a handicap to be avoided at all costs. As Staf & Andersson Varga (2002:9) write: ‘Den som lämnar skolan ... med en mer negativ attityd till skriftspråket undviker eller sorteras bort från de utvecklande miljöerna. I många fall är det dessa personer som hamnar i arbetslöshet’¹.

¹ Those who leave school ... with a more negative attitude towards the written language avoid or are sorted out of the developing environments. In many cases these people end up in unemployment.

EFL writing is the result of those two needs: English and writing. We are supposed to be able to write letters, e-mails, curriculums, books, text messages, school-related work, post-it notes and all kinds of exams in a language that is not our own, which puts demands on teachers and the entire school system. In this context, international comparative studies can be of great help in order to find out how well each school, region or country is doing in relation to their own curricular goals in writing and in relation to other administrative entities. The assessment and comparison of the writing proficiency, together with an analysis of the factors behind, could open up for the introduction of measures that lead to the improvement of that proficiency. Languages, especially English, are a central part of any competitive economy and inadequate language skills can be millions of Euros worth of missed cultural, political and economical opportunities. The European Union is very aware of the challenge and will carry out an ambitious Europe-wide survey on English proficiency that is scheduled for 2009.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this essay is **to compare** the English writing proficiency of two classes from a school in the Basque Country and one in Sweden at the end of their compulsory education. The second part of my aim is **to identify and analyze** the factors behind their writing proficiency. In-class and outside the class factors will be looked at to achieve this goal.

1.2 Structure

This study is structured into the following sections: In the introduction the subject, aim and key concepts are presented. In Previous research some relevant studies and issues are presented as a background information before going on to the Method section, where the methodological what, why and how are considered. The Results & Analysis section presents and analyzes the results of this study before the Conclusion section summarizes the major ideas and implications wrapping the essay up. In the Appendix chapter additional information can be found in form of the English curricular goals in Sweden and the Basque Country, an overview of the Basque and Swedish school systems and the essay test used in this study. Finally, the reference list with all the used bibliography can be found on the last page of the paper for easier access.

The decision to merge the results and the subsequent analysis sections into a single section was taken due to the belief that they belong together, as the former is the source of the latter and such a significant relation cannot be ignored. In addition, readers should have easier to follow the reasoning when offered the data that supports it in the same chapter, avoiding going back to the results chapter for a clearer picture.

1.3 Concepts

See the list below for a short explanation of what several terms are intended to mean in this study (in alphabetical order):

- Cognitive approach: a teaching approach that focuses on rule acquisition, balance in the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), vocabulary, tolerance for errors and the teacher's good proficiency in the target language.
- Communicative approach: a teaching approach that emphasizes the ability to communicate, pair and group work, role plays, authentic situations/materials and skill integration.
- Communicative competence: the ability to convey a message.
- Comprehensible input: language that the learner can understand.
- Conjunction: a sub-type of connector. See Connector.
- Connector: words that express relationships between ideas and combine sentences: and, because, furthermore, however...
- Direct assessment: essay or text writing test.
- EFL: it stands for English as a Foreign Language. When English is not the official, minority, native or commonly used language in the learner's country.
- Indirect assessment: a typical test consisting of different types of exercises.
- Interlanguage: the language produced by the learner in the process of learning another language.
- L1: the learner's mother tongue or first language, usually the language spoken at home.
- Oral-situational approach: a teaching approach that focuses on the spoken language, exclusive use of the target language, gradation of grammar and situation-based lexical/grammatical work.

- Reading approach: a teaching approach that puts reading comprehension in the spotlight vocabulary, grammar and translation being the tools to achieve that goal.
- Target language: the language that the learner studies.

2. Previous research

Groundbreaking research has paved the way for new theories on writing. Although still partially a mystery, writing has been defined as a complicated process that requires several activities simultaneously. In other words, the writer has to generate, organize and review ideas using the correct grammar, vocabulary and rules of the written language. Thus, the experience of writing is a cognitive task in which writers draw on ‘...information stored in long-term memory.... as [they juggle] a number of simultaneous constraints’ (Flower and Hayes, 1980 cited in Singleton-Jackson, 2003:12). If writing in your mother tongue is not easy, writing in a foreign language does not make it any easier. A central component in writing seems to be the working memory. Research shows (Torrance et al, 1999, cited in Singleton-Jackson, 2003:14, Ransdell & Levy, 1996, cited in Singleton-Jackson, 2003:15) that the better working memory we have the better we can write due to a greater capacity to carry out several tasks simultaneously.

Assessment of writing proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) has long been a subject of discussion and research. The concept “proficiency” is, to begin with, not easy to define. What is proficiency? The predominant view until the late 70’s was that proficiency was mainly equal to grammatical and lexical competence and that these two elements alone were enough to enable communication. Nevertheless, in the USA Spanish-speaking pupils coming out of English programs into all-English instruction kept experiencing linguistic difficulties despite having no problems with grammar or vocabulary, which strongly suggests that proficiency is something else than just those two elements (Harley, Cummings, Allen & Swain, 1990:7-8).

What are the elements that linguistic proficiency consists of? This issue has been approached from very different perspectives: Connector usage (Granger & Tyson, 1996; Narita, Sato & Sugiura, 1994; Tang, E & Ng, C, 1995), idiomatic expressions (Yorio, 1988), vocabulary (Read, 2000; Laufer & Nation, 1995), the influence of L1 in EFL (Uzawa, 2002; Cumming, 2001), syntax (Kuiken & Vedder, 2003), grammar (Rea-Dickins, 2001; Purpura, 2004) and others have been analyzed in an attempt to establish a relation or correlation between them and proficiency, written or not. All those studies focus, however, on isolated elements and do not explain to us what is considered as proficiency today.

Proficiency can nowadays be understood as the interaction of a multiple set of elements such as grammar, vocabulary and sociolinguistic, communicative and cognitive skills in order to achieve communication. This concept of proficiency is supported by Hernández-Chavez, Burt and Dulay (Cummins, 1980:176), who divide proficiency into three interacting areas: linguistic components (phonetics, syntax, semantics, and vocabulary), modality (comprehension and production) and sociolinguistic components (style, function, variety, and domain). The other extreme is represented by Oller, who claims the existence of a global language proficiency factor related to IQ and academic achievement (Cummins, 1980:175), a claim that is supported by a fair amount of research. Yet everyone, regardless of their IQ, can acquire a basic proficiency in their L1, which suggests that EFL proficiency is not only about IQ or academic skills.

When assessing writing proficiency it must be recognized that the oral and the written language differ in various ways and therefore, they cannot be assessed in the same manner. The written language demands higher accuracy both in form and content because we do not see the receiver of our text and thus, body language cannot be exploited and the context of the text has to be built linguistically. Syntax and vocabulary are also different and there is no possibility of instant replay or feedback as in oral communication. In writing there is no room for misunderstanding and the message has to be clearly structured and organized. All this raises the following question: ‘How can writing proficiency be assessed?’ This question has been answered in several ways during the years regarding three main issues: direct assessment vs. indirect assessment, the validation/reliability issue and analytical scoring vs. holistic scoring, which will be discussed in the following method chapter when justifying the method rationale of this paper.

As to writing proficiency, valuable research has been carried out in the past two decades in the field of EFL (Ransdell & Barbier, 2002; Cumming & Mellow, 1996). Yet very little research has been carried out in form of international comparative studies such as this paper. Mihaljević and Nikolov (2008) did a comparative study on the English skills of Croatian and Hungarian 14 year-olds where Croatians clearly outperformed Hungarians in all surveyed skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). The written element of this study consisted of writing down the ten small differences between two at first sight identical pictures. The main conclusion of this study was that success in EFL learning is not guaranteed by start at early ages, more lessons a week or learning in small groups as, despite all these “advantages”, Hungarian students were clearly outperformed by their Croatian counterparts in every measured area. On the contrary, it was suggested that the quality of teaching and

exposure to comprehensible input in and out of the classroom, both present in Croatia, are two key factors in EFL learning and as a result, in proficiency.

A more ambitious comparative study was conducted in 2002 by The European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems, where 12,000 students aged 14-15 from eight European countries were tested on their English proficiency. All linguistic skills were tested. The writing exercise consisted of filling in the gaps of a dialogue and of a text. The results of the Spanish pupils were not flattering: together with the French they were at the back of the pack in all tested areas, especially in the present paper's area of study: written production.

These two studies did not cover two aspects that, in my view, are worth surveying. First, none of them tested writing proficiency through writing. Cooper (1984:2) suggests that such tests are not valid because '...the examinees do not write'. Second, none of them had writing proficiency as the main focus. Given these two facts, there seemed to be some unexplored waters for this study to chart.

3. Method

3.1 Choice of method

According to Harmer (2006:321) there are four different tests at our disposal to assess writing skills: Placement tests, diagnostic tests, achievement tests and proficiency tests. Placement tests show how good a student's English is in relation to a system of levels. Diagnostic tests expose learner difficulties and gaps in their knowledge whereas achievement tests assess the assimilation level of a specific material and proficiency tests aim at the 'assessment of the pupils' general language skill levels' (Erickson, 2001:45). Since the goal of this study is EFL writing skill level, the proficiency path was chosen. When it comes to proficiency tests the assessment's what and how have to be considered, where the latter should come as a conclusion of the first one. If assessment of the general language skill level is the goal, how can it be achieved in a reliable way? A test consisting of different exercises has long been common practice in the school world and most exams are designed that way. In these tests, every language item gets its own exercise: true or false statements about a text in order to assess reading comprehension, a multiple-choice exercise for vocabulary, a dictation to test spelling or a cloze to assess correct verb use. Separate exercises can be helpful in assessing writing proficiency; they are, however, clearly insufficient and a shift from indirect assessment to direct assessment was driven by the communicative theories put forward in the 70's. Why are essay tests better?

First, knowing, for example, in which tense to put the missing verb in the gap does not guarantee a correct verb use in writing. In this respect, Viberg (2001:40-42) establishes a subtle difference between, on one hand, knowledge, that is, 'what has been learnt', and control on the other hand, which is 'the ability to use that knowledge'. Sandra Fotos in Celce-Murcia (2001:273) suggests that opportunities for output are as important as input. Comprehension or input is not enough because students can understand the meaning by the context, that is, by 'guessing, predicting and world knowledge'. This might happen in testing as well, students can deduce the answer to a multiple-choice question or a fill in the gap exercise by the linguistic context.

Secondly, Erickson (2001:46) states that pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary 'are the necessary building blocks of communicative competence'. In other words, communicative competence consists of the integrated use we make of our different skills. Therefore, if a more

accurate picture of the students' proficiency is to be obtained, these skills should not be assessed separately but in an integrated manner. As a matter of fact, the Swedish national syllabus, for example, does not 'contain separate components for assessing pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar' (Erickson, 2001:46) because in the syllabus they are not considered goals.

Thirdly, multiple-choice tests tend to lack credibility because you cannot measure writing ability if students do not write. In Hedge's words (2000:301) 'learning to write through writing' might be a better option. Although Hedge's words apply to learning a parallel can be drawn to testing: Would it make sense to take the driving license with no driving test? Consequently, a writing test should be the best way to assess writing proficiency, Earle G. Eley (1955:11) has argued that 'an adequate essay test of writing is valid by definition (...) since it requires the candidate to perform the actual behavior which is being measured'. In this respect, Cooper (1984:1-2) indicates that essay tests are considered as a more valid tool and he even mentions the possibility of side effects as well. 'Students may presume that writing is not important, or teachers that writing can be taught through multiple-choice exercises'.

Fourthly, essay tests, like any other test, raise the issues of validity and reliability, which according to Harmer (2006:322) are two key concepts when judging test effectiveness. Let us take a fast look at these two concepts.

Validity: A test is valid if it tests what it is supposed to test. Harmer's example of an essay question that requires specialist knowledge of history is a case of poor validity since the lack of that knowledge might be the cause of a poor performance, not the language itself.

Reliability: 'A good test should give consistent results' (Harmer, 2006:322). The same group of students should get similar results each time they take the same test over a short period of time.

According to Cooper (1984:4) reliability tends to be a problem in free essay testing because 'different topics often require different skills or make different conceptual demands.'. Moreover, we can never know if the student is writing the best he/she can, in which case we would be assessing writing performance and not writing ability. None of this, however, seems to be an issue in this study: on one hand, all the students were given the same topic and on the other hand, multiple-choice tests and other tests cannot assess ability better either. How can one possibly know that students are doing their best on any test? In addition to this, it has been found that 'direct and indirect assessments appear statistically to measure very similar skills' (Cooper, 1984:2). To sum up, having in mind all of the above and the integrating

nature of writing skill, essays seem to be at least as valid as any other tests for measuring proficiency.

3.2 Choice of essay

It was considered to have the students write a free essay where they could write about whatever they liked to. Nevertheless, according to Cooper (1984:4), ‘if no topic is prescribed ... comparability across topics is hard to achieve’. Consequently, the students were given the same topic, a framework that would allow their English to “shine” but within limits common to all.

An essay test that meets requirements of both proficiency testing and a specific topic is the Swedish national test’s essay part, which was finally chosen for this purpose. According to Erickson (2001:45) the Swedish ‘national tests are proficiency tests’. This proficiency test is taken by Swedish students of age 15 all over the country in order to assess their overall level in Mathematics, Swedish and English. Within the English test there is a topic specific essay that the students are supposed to write. The use of a Swedish national exam has above all two advantages. On one hand, these exams are designed to ‘provide support in assessing pupils’ knowledge in relation to the national goals’ (Erickson, 2001:45), which assures that the exams are made by competent professionals, and on the other hand, the Swedish government’s ambition seems to be that ‘tests should be permeated by cultural aspects (interculturalism) in a broad sense.’ (Erickson, 2001:46). This means that the local cultural aspects of the test should disappear, giving the Swedish students no advantage over their Basque counterparts. The topic that the students are supposed to write about is international and any teenager can relate to it.

An ongoing controversy in the assessment of writing proficiency is how texts should be scored, the two main approaches being the holistic approach and the analytical approach. The holistic method is based on the theory that a text is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, it evaluates a text as a whole without focusing on and grading specific features one by one, whereas the analytical approach grades a predetermined set of features individually. The former method is less time-consuming but the latter is more detailed and gives more feedback to the learner. Furthermore, it appears that there is a tendency among holistic text raters not to focus on their scoring guide and depend on their personal reaction to the text (Anderson & Banerjee, 2001). The analytical approach was chosen for this study, on the one hand because

both methods are said to be equally reliable and accurate, and on the other hand, in order to avoid the slight possibility of subjectivity in the holistic approach.

3.3 Choice of features

There are several ways of assessing writing skills in a second or foreign language depending on what you are looking for. One can focus on the organization of ideas or an adequate use of paragraphs. One can as well concentrate on specific features like vocabulary whereas others prefer to focus on spelling or verb use. Since writing skill consists of the working-together of many features, the fewer features you look at the less reliable your work will be.

The relevance of the features is equally of great importance, especially if they are few. If your focus is grammar it would not be a good idea to analyze paragraphs whereas looking at the 3rd person singular “-s” will not help you assessing the cohesion of a text. Therefore, features must be carefully chosen in order to give an accurate picture of what you are searching for. Since the focus of this essay is the overall writing proficiency in English, features like text structure and punctuation were discarded in favor of the language itself. Of the numerous aspects a text can be looked at such as syntax, vocabulary, cohesion or grammar, four features were considered to be relevant enough for the task at hand: the use of verbs (grammar), the use of conjunctions (cohesion), spelling (orthography/form) and text length (writing quality and as a control measure for comparison accuracy that will be explained later on).

Research suggests that ‘the less English proficiency learners possess, the more L1 interference is found in their writings’ (Li-Ling Chen, 2006:77), yet L1 interference was ruled out as a feature for several reasons: on one hand, it can be hard to decide what is an L1 interference and what is not, and on the other hand, the presence of two different L1s in both schools made it even more difficult: Basque-Spanish and minority language-Swedish. Consequently, mistakes in the essays such as “I have 15 years old” (instead of “I am 15 years old”) and the use of L1 vocabulary were not taken into account as they were considered to be L1 interference.

Vocabulary was also ruled out as a criterion for writing quality, mainly due to the characteristics of the test. Being a topic-specific essay it would not have been valid to assess the general vocabulary level of the pupils. A student may write brilliantly about the topic in the test but worse about other topics. Students may also avoid vocabulary problems with paraphrases and other problem solving strategies. Thus, it is very difficult to assess the

general vocabulary level with this kind of test. Another reason for ruling out vocabulary is the criteria that should be used. According to Torberg (2000:91) in order to know a word we must be able to spell it, pronounce it, conjugate it, understand it when used, use it ourselves and even translate it. When should a vocabulary item be considered wrong? Is one spelling mistake enough? A wrong semantic use of the word? Should one focus on quality or quantity? Should idioms or just individual words count? What lexical items do indicate a good vocabulary within a given topic and what lexical items do not? In other words, it is simply too complicated for the purpose of this study.

3.3.1 Verbs

The usage of verbs was originally chosen as a representative of grammar, which according to Pongsiriwet (2001:5) has been found to be a major source of writing errors. Verbs in particular are a central part of language proficiency and can be difficult to master. Pongsiriwet (2001:70) found that verbs are the main source of grammatical errors in EFL writing: irregular past tenses, 3rd person singular “-s” and auxiliary verbs such as “do/does/did, can, may, shall, will” and their variants can be the Achilles heel of many students.

3.3.2 Connectors: conjunctions

According to Byrne (1979:18) connectors are ‘words or phrases which indicate meaning relationship between or within sentences’ but they are also known as connectives or conjunctions (Tang & Ng, 1995:105). In this study, they will be referred to as connectors except when talking about a specific sub-group called “conjunctions”, whose task is to indicate semantical or hierarchical relationship between sentences or introduce subordinate sentences (*and, but, because, if, since, as, although, that, wh-words* and others). Although no significant correlation has been found between connector usage and EFL writing proficiency (Granger & Tyson, 1996:17), other researchers maintain that textual cohesion correlates highly with other aspects of efficient writing. Thus, such a correlation was observed in the case of advanced learners and ‘the importance of teaching cohesive stylistic devices’ was emphasized. (J. Milton & Tsang, 1993:217).

The original idea was to analyze connectors in general but this thought was finally put aside on the basis of their absence in the students' texts. Neither Swedish nor Basque students used them to any significant extent. Thus, words such as *however, yet, finally, then, due to, therefore, in that case, on the other hand* and others were virtually absent, which confirms the idea that general connectors are mainly used in academic and argumentative texts, not in descriptive texts about everyday life written by teenagers. Accordingly, the focus shifted from connectors in general to conjunctions in particular, which were extensively used by the students and therefore, relevant to include in the study.

The lack of conjunctions was considered an issue as well. Counting every time that a conjunction was missing might provide additional information about the cohesion skills of the students but this procedure encounters the difficulty of measuring what is absent in the text. How can one assess what is not actually there? In this case, assessing might turn into pure and simple guessing about whether a given conjunction should have been employed or not. Given the difficulty of the task and the data on conjunction use already gathered, the issue was ignored in this study.

After having gone through some essays it became clear that certain conjunctions were used to a much higher extent than others and consequently, they were grouped according to their usage in order to facilitate the posterior analysis and comparison of the data. Only conjunctions used correctly were counted. The relative pronoun "that" was not included in the same group as the other relative pronouns but was placed in its own group due to its extensive use and own characteristics. Elisions/omissions of "that" were counted as well. Conjunctions were grouped in categories as follows:

Group 1: and/or

Group 2: But

Group 3: because

Group 4: that

Group 5: wh-pronouns introducing relative clauses (who, whom, whose, what, where, when, why, how, which...)

Group 6: others (since, as, so, if, unless, though, then, while, whereas...)

In this study groups 1-3 will be referred to as basic conjunctions as they are the most common and easy ones to learn/use (addition, opposition and causality are seen as the three basic concepts) while groups 4-6 will be considered as advanced due to them involving

subordinate clauses and syntactic complexity. This decision proved to be relevant and helpful when analyzing the data. A separate count was made in order not to focus exclusively on the number of conjunctions but on the variation as well because a richer set of conjunctions might indicate or correlate highly with more proficient writing. Thus, if “because” and “if” were used in an essay four and three times respectively they were counted as two unique conjunctions.

3.3.3 *Spelling*

Spelling was chosen for several reasons. On one hand, spelling is, a typical feature found in writing and therefore, highly relevant and worth surveying. On the other hand, form is a key feature in writing, spelling being a part of it; a badly spelt/spelled text not only makes comprehension more difficult but also gives poor impression and damages credibility. This is even more relevant in English, where pronunciation and spelling do not necessarily match. In order not to focus solely on the number of spelling mistakes, a separate counting was made where each unique spelling mistake was counted once. For example, the mistake “Hous” (house) was only counted once even if it occurred four times in the text. This was done to keep/prevent high frequency words from giving a wrong picture of students’ writing ability.

3.3.4 *Text Length*

Text length was included in the study for two reasons. First, as the data was been analyzed it soon became clear that some of the results were in direct relation with the text length. Thus, the Basque class’ average conjunction score was worse than their Swedish counterparts, but only due to their much shorter texts. As soon as conjunction usage was put in relation to the written production, the difference between both classes vanished. The same procedure was used with verb and spelling mistakes. In order to calculate text length, all written lines of more than 8 words were counted per student and per class. Secondly, text length has been found to be connected to the quality of writing. According to Chuming, (2005:17) ‘length influences the overall quality of essays and is one of the effective indicators of EFL learners’ level of writing ability’. In this respect, Larsen-Freeman (1978:440) observed that students with a good writing ability tend to write longer compositions. Although correlation and casual relationship are not the same it is clearly worth surveying it in this study. In sum, there

seem to be enough reasons to measure writing proficiency with the help of the four features/above.

3.4 Background and Method Implementation

3.4.1 School B

The school chosen in the Basque Country will be anonymous (known as B from now on) and it is a public school located in the municipality of Erandio with approximately 25.000 inhabitants. A suburb to the city of Bilbao (500.000 inhabitants), Erandio was known for its industries and numerous working class until the early 80s, where due to an economic crisis, the whole area started a reconversion into the services' sector. Thus, the socioeconomic background in Erandio is nowadays mainly working and lower-middle class. The whole metropolitan area is predominantly Spanish-speaking (80 %) due to a heavy immigration from Spain in the years 1900 – 1970, although B is a school where Basque is the language of instruction in all subjects regardless of the student's mother tongue. B is the typical example of a language immersion school for Spanish-speakers to achieve a minimum command of the Basque language. They have 650 students from age 3 to 15 and students start studying English at the age of 6-7 years old which means that the class in this study, 4A, has been studying English for 8-9 years (6th, 7th, 8th and 9th grades in Sweden correspond to 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades in the Basque school system). 4A (see appendix A) consists of 21 pupils, 12 girls and 9 boys. They have English as a subject three times a week (165 minutes), each lesson being 55 minutes long. In two of these lessons the class is split into two halves so they have English in small groups of 10-12. In addition, 8 pupils in the class attend private lessons in their free time in order to improve their English skills.

3.4.2 School S

School S is a private or independent school located in the old part of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden with about 1.000.000 inhabitants. This school was founded in the 1940s and is run by one of Stockholm's linguistic communities in order to preserve their language and transmit it to the following generations. It is a little school with 180 students aged 6 to 15. Their minority language is often used at home but Swedish has its place as well. The partial use of Swedish at home together with its overwhelming presence in everyday life and its use as the language

of instruction makes possible a native-like proficiency in the language. The socioeconomic background is quite diverse, from lower- to upper-middle class due to the fact the students come to the school from very different locations and family situations where their minority language and culture are the only things they have in common. Nevertheless, middle and upper-middle classes are predominant.

The class that took part in the study is called 9A and consists of 19 pupils, 10 girls and 9 boys. They have English three times a week (a total of 135 minutes a week) in the whole class, that is, there is no splitting like in School B. 9A have been studying English for 8-9 years.

School B and school S were randomly chosen as representatives of their respective national school systems but 4A and 9A were not. These two classes were picked on the following basis:

- They are the end of compulsory education.
- National test: having an essay test ready and designed by professionals facilitated assessment
- Years of English: both 4A and 9A have been studying English for 8-9 years.
- Size: both classes are approximately the same size.
- Gender: both classes have a balanced distribution of boys and girls.

3.4.3 Method Implementation

The purpose of my visit was explained to both classes after which the test was explained and handed out. The original idea was to give both classes 80 minutes to complete it but due to time table problems, it was not possible to do so at school B. Therefore, 4A only had 60 minutes. This turned out, however, not to be a problem as hardly any Basque pupils kept on writing after the first 40-45 minutes. The test (see appendix B) consisted of two tasks of which the pupils were to choose one: writing about a special moment in their lives or responding to a letter coming from a High School in Ohio (USA) where they were supposed to write about their lives, their country, families, free time, future plans etc. A few Basque students had doubts about whether they had understood the task correctly but it became clear that it was due to their unfamiliarity with that sort of test rather than to a comprehension issue. Knowledge questions such as “how do you say X in English?” or “Should I write X or Y here?” were obviously not answered during the test. Almost no Basque student needed more than 40 minutes to accomplish the task while 6-7 Swedes stayed over 60-65 minutes. Once in

possession of the tests, the different features were marked as follows: yellow underlining for verb mistakes, black underlining for spelling mistakes and red for conjunctions. The different colors facilitated the identification and counting of every item, thereby saving precious time. All the results were then put into an excel file.

3.5 Lesson Observation

3.5.1 School B

During week 43 (20-24 October) and weeks 46-47 (6-11 November) I did intensive lesson observation in school B to try to identify “in-class” factors that might partially explain the written performance of the students. I had the opportunity to be with three different teachers of English (who will remain anonymous), which enabled me to attend 16 lessons during week 43 and 6 more lessons during weeks 46-47. There were two reasons for me to attend other lessons than 4A’s. First, my short stay in the Basque Country only allowed me to attend four lessons at 4A. Therefore, I decided to attend as many English lessons as possible to compensate for this potentially insufficient lesson observation. And second, my goal being detection of in-class factors that could explain their level of English, a single teacher or a single class are not enough because the proficiency of a class is not just the result of one teacher alone but of a teaching pattern or school culture throughout the years. In other words, I believe the proficiency level to be the result of the school system (if “outside school factors” are left out such as socioeconomic background, family situation etc). In order to truly understand the in-class factors behind their performance, the system itself has to be put under the microscope.

This extensive lesson observation gave me the opportunity to observe three teachers in eight different classes and to see that their teaching was quite similar. Thanks to this, I understood that the teaching approach applied in 4A was not something unique but quite general at the school, thereby opening up the possibility of a generalization of the results of this study to the whole Basque School system. Thus, the “in-class” factors behind the English proficiency of 4A could be a consequence of the system and not only of the teacher(s) that they have been assigned throughout the years.

I introduced myself to the students explaining the purpose of my visit, sat down and tried to observe the rest of the lesson in silence, which was not always possible due to curious students asking questions about me, Sweden and my essay project. While in class, I looked

mostly for any activities and exercises connected to my main areas of research: verb use, conjunctions, spelling and writing in general. The documentation system was taking notes during the lessons and I also had informal conversations with the English teachers about their teaching, the classes and the school in general.

Regarding the use and quality of English a pattern emerged very soon. In spite of significant differences between teachers the overall English level was poorer than the Swedish teachers'. Teachers tried to speak English but they gave up soon and started alternating Basque and English, due both to their own insecurity with the language and to situational or practical reasons, especially when some student did not understand what to do.

When it comes to the methodology everything revolves around the course book. The students read, for instance, a situational text in the book (at the post office, at a friend's...) and did a listening comprehension with a CD. Later they started doing exercises in the book or exercise sheets that were handed out by the teacher: fill in the gaps, reading comprehension etc... Thus, the focus lies on non-productive skills like reading and listening. Pronunciation is seldom corrected and speaking and writing are quite neglected. According to the teachers, this methodology is not what they would like to apply in the classroom but the students are so mischievous and talkative that the only way for them to be quiet and get some work done is by giving them exercises in a steady stream. Speaking exercises are said not to work because students do not take them seriously and they do not conduct them in English despite the teacher's efforts. According to the teachers, talking to the parents about their children's behavior does not help. During my lesson observation I could see constant proof of what the teachers meant. While not doing exercises, many students talked continuously to each other and did not listen when the teacher was giving instructions. Moreover, when correcting exercises or performing teacher-led activities the students often interrupted the teacher and each other. Few raised their hand and waited for their turn.

The lack of punctuality was something remarkable as well. No lesson started ever on time, the average delay being at least 5 minutes, closer to ten if it was the first lesson in the morning. Those approximately 20 lost minutes per week can add up to many English hours throughout the years, not to mention the careless and sloppy learning environment that it contributes to. These delays are mainly due to the following reasons:

- There are no scheduled breaks between lessons so students do not have time to take a break or change books and classroom if necessary. Even when in time, they talk and

walk around in class for a moment before they sit down at their desks and get ready.

The reasons for this non-stop schedule are unknown to this humble researcher.

- The teacher holding the previous lesson goes overtime.
- Punctuality in the Basque culture is not considered as important as in Sweden.

According to Celce-Murcia's description, (2001:7), the core of teaching at school B seems to be the cognitive approach. During my lesson observation I found that rule acquisition, extensive grammar teaching and neglected pronunciation are common practice. In addition to this and down the same path of teaching traditionalism, no need for a teacher's good oral proficiency (reading approach) and the introduction of new grammar and vocabulary situationally (at the bank, at the dinner table...) are present as well (oral-situational approach).

3.5.2 School S

The lesson observation at school S was carried out during weeks 47-49. I attended fewer English lessons (9 lessons) than at school B due to work schedule reasons and the size of the school (only one class per grade), which limited my observation opportunities. Yet, I believe the attended hours to be sufficient to give a fair picture of the teaching of English at School S.

The pupils stand up by their desks when the teacher arrives in the classroom and sit down only when the teacher greets them with a "Good morning". All the English lessons that I attended at school S distinguished themselves in silence and discipline. Everybody raised their hands when they wanted to say something and did not interrupt when somebody else was speaking. Both observed teachers spoke very good English as a result of their prolonged stays in Canada and England and the language used in class was almost exclusively English, both by the teachers and by the students, although Swedish was used when explaining grammar.

One of the differences with the Basque school was the attention paid to reading and pronunciation skills, especially on the seventh grade. While part of the class was taking a vocabulary test or doing exercises, other students were being called one by one out to the hallway, where they read a passage of a text and got feedback on their reading skills, pronunciation of words and native-like intonation. In some cases it went as far as showing the students how to use mouth, tongue and teeth to pronounce certain sounds, especially those absent in the Swedish language like the "th" sound. When asked, the teacher said that this was

a quite regularly recurring feature in her teaching and that she also made pupils read aloud in the class.

On another occasion 9A did a listening comprehension exercise where they listened to radio news and had to answer the teacher's questions about the content. After that the students were handed out a news quiz which they had to read aloud and give the right answer to. One of the questions was later translated and handed in to the teacher. Movies (Billie Elliot and One flew over the Cuckoo's nest) were used in the classroom for EFL exposure and discussion. After watching One flew over the Cuckoo's nest, the students discussed the movie in small groups with the help of questions/statements previously handed out by the teacher. They were also supposed to write an essay about the movie for the following week.

As to the methodology or teaching approach I could not see any remarkable differences, except for the speaking exercises carried out. The teaching approach in Sweden is said to be more communicative with focus on language production skills such as writing and speaking and students at school S certainly do work on them. Whether this distinguishes school S from the rest of Swedish schools or it is a generalized teaching practice remains to be seen in other studies to come.

3.6 Limitations

The national syllabus may pose a problem. The curricular goals in the Basque Country and Sweden are not alike and working towards different goals may imply different performances. Thus, the Swedish essay test might have posed a problem due to its designated nature of assessing Swedish national goals, not Basque ones. Was the task too difficult for the Basque students due to their different national goals? An affirmative answer to this question, on the other hand, would support the main conclusion that the Swedish class' writing proficiency is clearly better. As a matter of fact, the Basque and the Swedish syllabuses are like day and night. The Swedish syllabus (see appendix C) focuses on knowledge and skills such as understanding, taking part in discussions, reading texts, making yourself understood, reflecting over your own learning or carrying out simple oral and written tasks. To Swedish eyes, grammar and vocabulary are not even goals as such, and how the goals are to be attained is left to teachers' discretion. In contrast, the Basque syllabus (see appendix D) is what Harmer (2006:299-300) calls a multi-syllabus syllabus, a syllabus showing 'any combination of items from grammar, lexis, language functions, situations, topics, tasks...'. Within each skill there are further goals that students should have attained, such as answering questions

about a text giving a long answer (reading), identifying true and false sentences (listening) or making a chart out of verb forms (grammar). In fact, it is so detailed that every goal within each language skill has been assigned a specific term during the school year. Thus, asking and giving directions must be studied during term 2 (out of 3) while the present simple and present continuous are studied in term 1.

4. Results and analysis

In this study the aim was to determine the writing proficiency level of EFL students in Sweden and the Basque Country. In order to do this the students took an essay test in which some relevant features were measured. This chapter will lead the reader, feature by feature, through the results and an analysis. All figures are based on the results of 21 Basque students and 19 Swedish students. The figures are inserted in the text for practical reasons: Data is presented in a gathered and more comprehensible way, a good overview is given and reading is easier. Having the figures only at the end forces readers to look for them while reading the results and discussion section. Before starting with the first feature, conjunction usage, see figure 1 below for a basic general idea of the data.

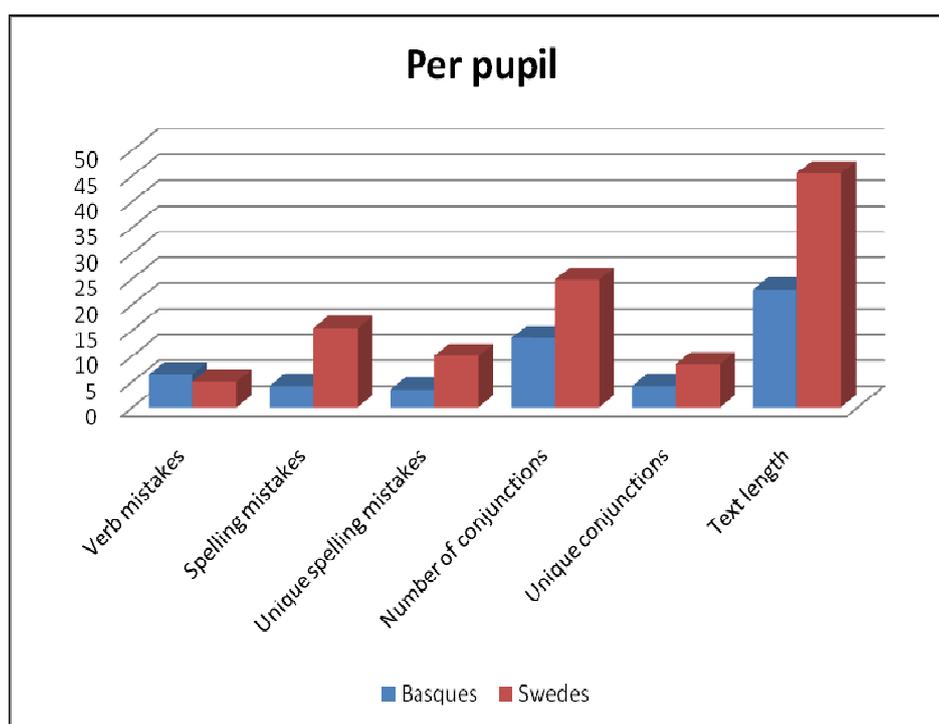


Figure 1

4.1 Conjunctions

First of all, figure 2 below shows that the average Swedish result per pupil on conjunction usage and variety is clearly better, which could make us come to the conclusion that the Basques put up a poor performance on that item.

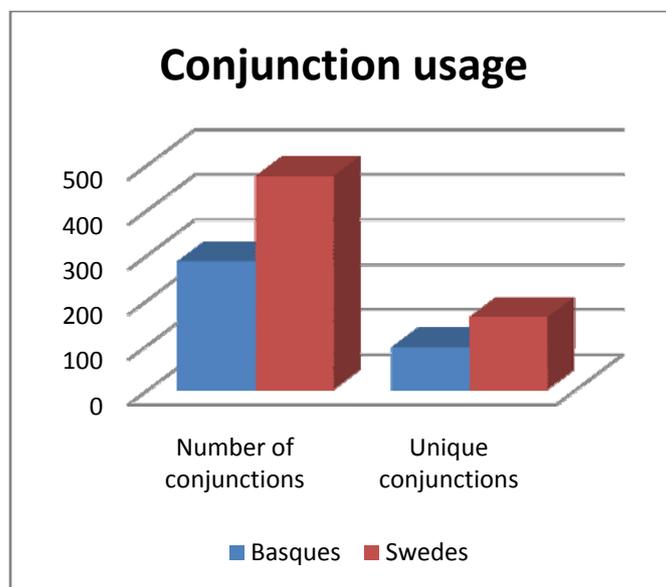


Figure 2 (284 conjunctions)

This picture changes, however, when calculating the text frequency (see figure 3). When text length is taken into account, the result is a balanced score of 1,8 to 1,7 in terms of text lines per used conjunction, that is, both classes use a conjunction every 1,8 or 1,7 lines. In the case of unique conjunctions the results are 5,4 and 5,2 lines. Consequently, any possible difference in syntactic quality or complexity between both classes cannot lie in the number of conjunctions used.

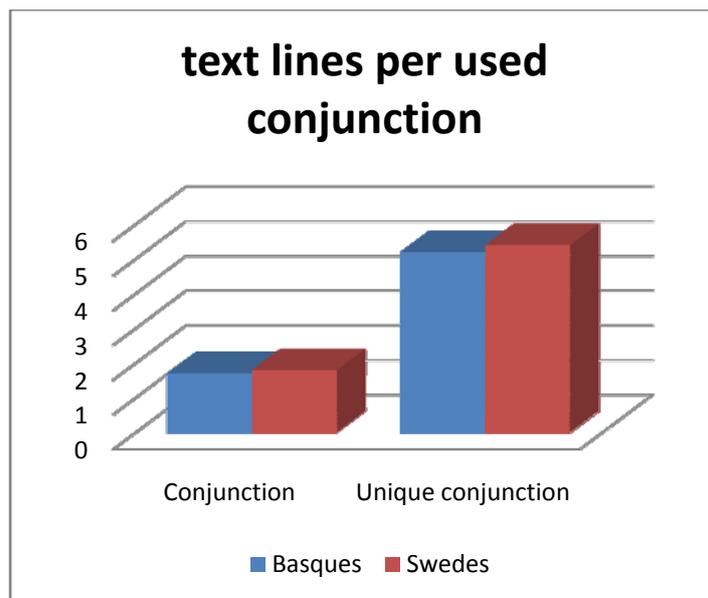


Figure 3

Figure 4 shows that the use of “and/or” and “but” constitutes over 50% of the conjunctions used by the Basque students, while that percentage is only 39% in the Swedish class (figure 5). Both figures show a remarkable difference regarding the conjunctions “that” and “wh-words”. Whereas only 30% of the Basque conjunctions belong to that type, the number increases to 45% in the Swedish case. Since “that” and “wh-words” introduce subordinate relative clauses, a reasonable conclusion is that Swedish pupils perform much better in terms of syntactic complexity/maturity.

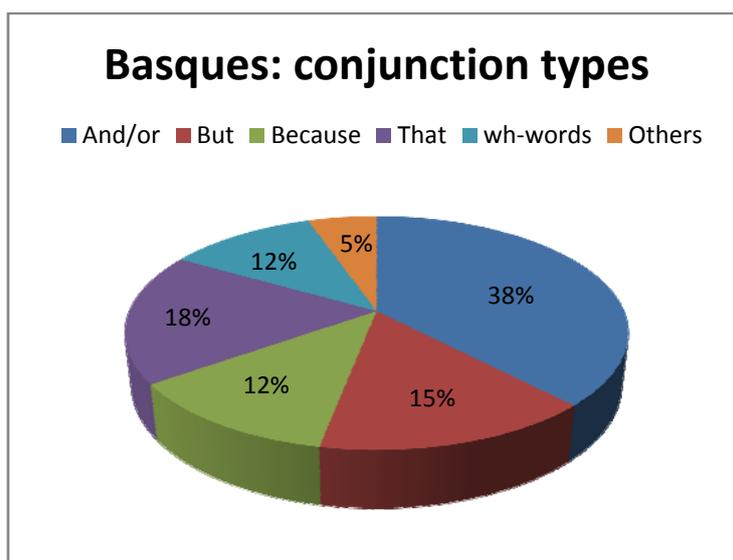


Figure 4 (284 conjunctions)

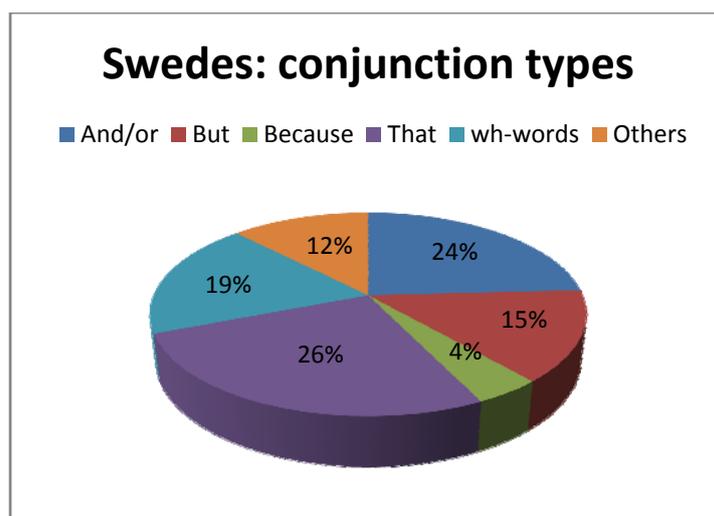


Figure 5 (473 conjunctions)

In addition to this, the category “others” is 12% in the case of the Swedes (5% among the Basques) which adds even more variety and richness to the Swedish texts. Conjunctions such as “though”, “since”, “as”, “so”, “if” and “while” were not uncommon whereas the Basque students only enriched their conjunction usage with “if”. Apparently, Basque students chose not to use conjunctions to connect sentences or did so by using basic connectors such as “and/or”, “but”, “because”, which makes their writing look more like a group of independent sentences and ideas rather than a coherent text. Thus, the difference regarding conjunction usage was not in the quantity but in the type and variety of the conjunctions.

In figures 6 and 7 the conjunctions have been put together in two groups: basic conjunctions that include “and/or”, “but” and “because” on one hand, and advanced conjunctions such as “that”, “wh-ords” and “others” on the other. This should improve the general view on the syntactic performance of the ones and the others. In the case of the Basque pupils the advanced conjunctions constitute no more than 35 % whereas in the case of the Swedes it is 57%. These percentages reflect the difference in syntactic complexity between both classes and reinforce the previous idea in figure 5, which is that type and variety and not quantity accounts for the better performance of the Swedish class.

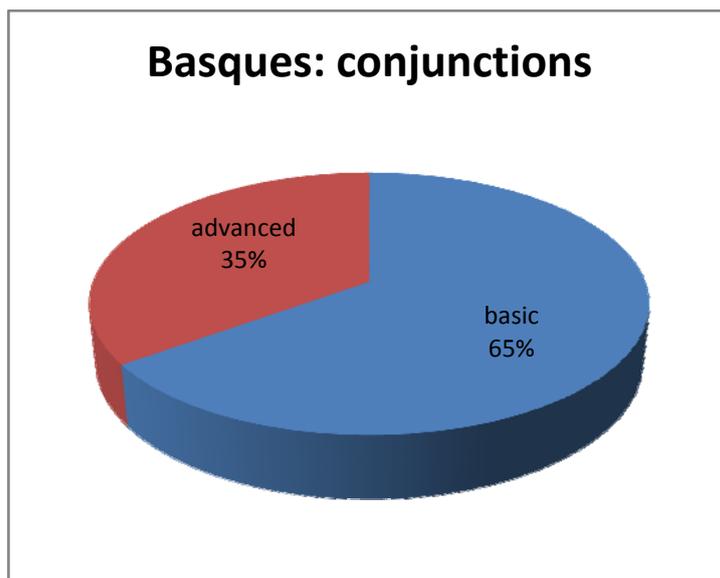


Figure 6 (284 conjunctions)

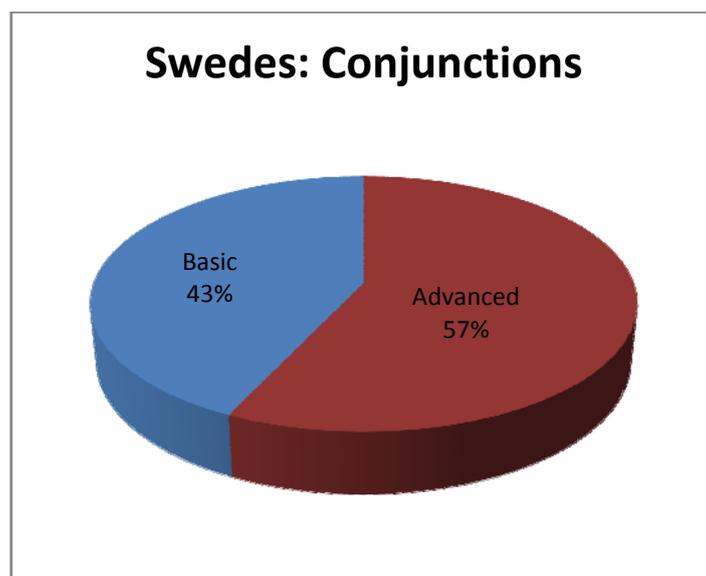


Figure 7 (473 conjunctions)

4.2 Verbs

Verb errors were one of the results that seemed balanced at first sight. Once again, the Swedish students committed fewer verb errors than the Basque ones but the difference was not remarkable in any way (see figure 8). On average every Basque student had 6,4 verb errors and every Swedish student 5,0.

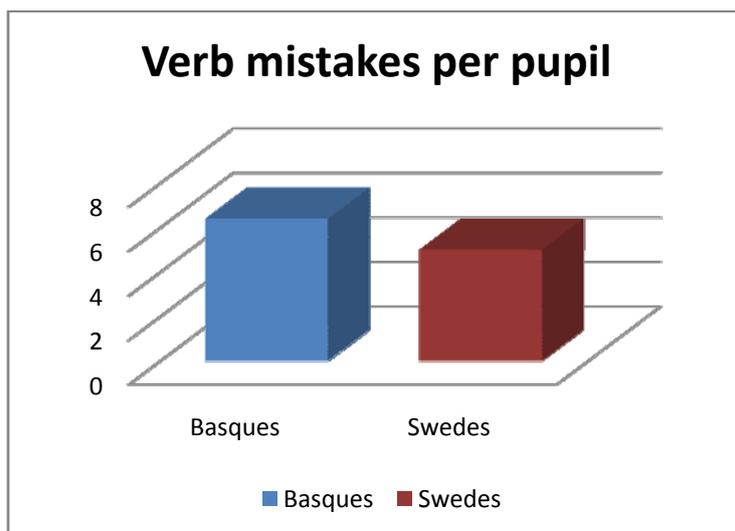


Figure 8 (Basques: 136 mistakes, Swedes: 95 mistakes)

Once the text length was taken into account, however, the picture changed completely. As shown in figure 8 above, the Basques wrote an average of 3,5 lines before making a mistake whereas their Swedish counterparts managed to write 9,1 lines, which is close to three times more.

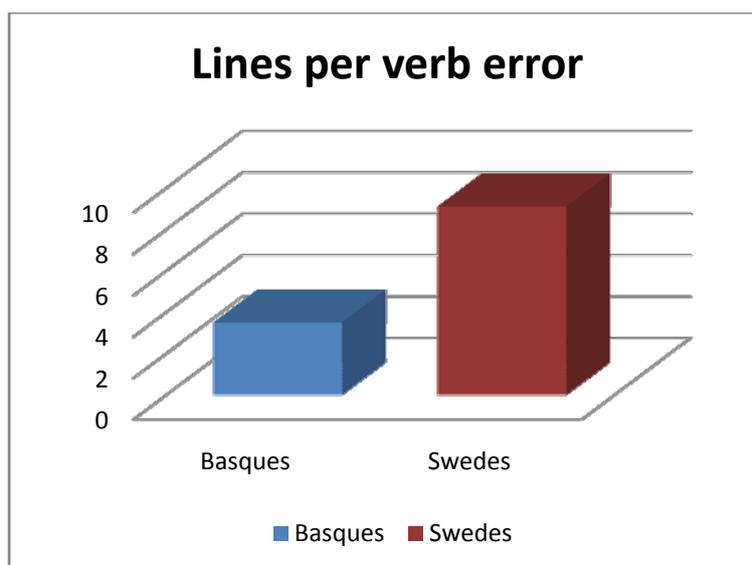


Figure 9 (Basque text length: 485, Swedish text length: 866)

The factors behind this lower performance are unknown at this point but let us speculate on a couple of ideas. First of all, the grammatical methodology consists mainly of doing different types of exercises on the course book or on sheets handed out by the teacher. As mentioned in section 3.2, that kind of drilling does not necessarily mean that the students are able to use grammar correctly in a text or in an authentic situation. The students will certainly, to a certain extent, learn some grammar but they will be learning to do grammar exercises instead of learning to use grammar in a communicative situation. Secondly, Spanish grammar is far from being similar to the English one (as Swedish grammar is) and Basque grammar cannot be of much help either, as Basque is not even an Indo-European language.

The difference between Basques and Swedes also showed in the kind of verb mistakes that were made. The Swedish students had difficulties in the area of subject-verb agreement (a non-existent feature in Swedish), that is, when to employ *is/are*, *do/does* and 3rd person *-s*. Some examples from their essays would be “Every young Swedish pupil *do...*”, “Boys in Sweden *likes...*” and “Relatives that *lives* there”. On the other hand, the Basque pupils struggled with the past tense to such an extent that in cases where the past tense was required, they simply wrote the present tense form of the verb. Many irregular past tense forms were also wrong, for instance in examples such as “*I’m go* to school B”, “We have *buy* a local” and “Last year we *do* one job”.

4.3 Text length

As shown in figure 10 below there is a remarkable difference in text length between both classes. The Swedish class averaged 45,5 text lines per pupil while the Basque class produced 23 text lines per pupil.

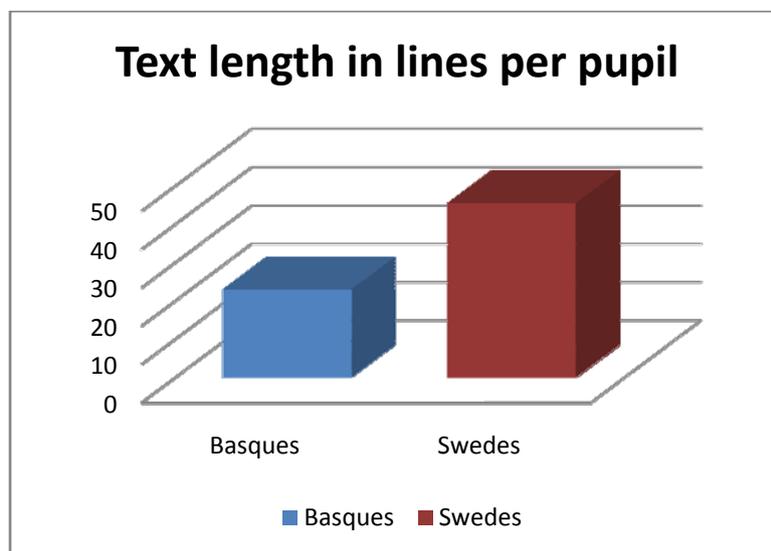


Figure 10 (Basque text length: 485, Swedish text length: 866)

Although the Basque students were not asked why they did not write more, one of the possible answers might be because they couldn't. Lesson observation and conversations with the teachers showed that these students are not used to writing texts in English and they lack not only the habit but also some of the vocabulary and grammar to do so. Some of the Basque students were overheard during the exam wondering what they were supposed to write about now that they had run out of ideas. Did they really not know what to write or did they not know how to write what they wanted to write? As mentioned in section 3.3.4, Chuming (1978:17) established a significant correlation between text length and writing proficiency, which seems to be supported by the results. This correlation, together with the scores in all features but spelling, insufficient proficiency to express themselves the way they would like to is probably the explanation.

4.4 Spelling mistakes

As shown in figure 11 below, the Basque students committed far fewer spelling mistakes than their Swedes counterparts. The Basques pupils averaged 4,3 mistakes per pupil whereas the Swedes had 15,4 errors.

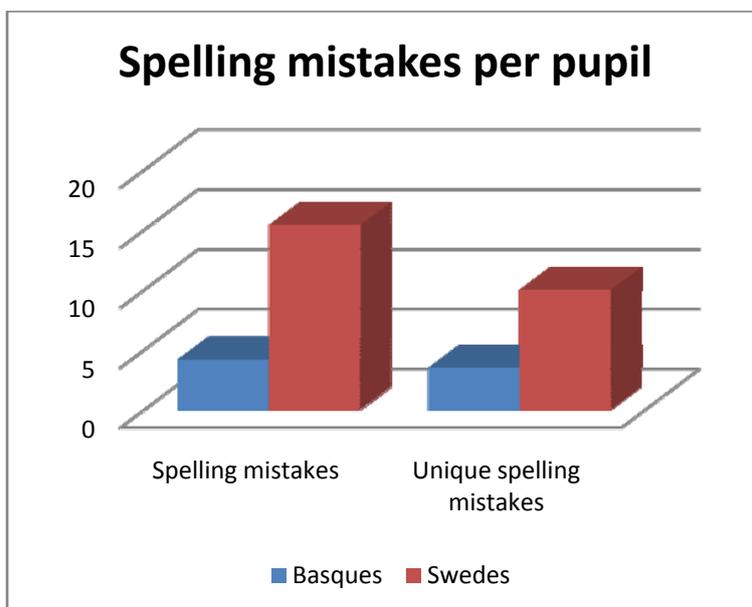


Figure 11

When compared to the text length the result did not vary in any significant way. The Basque students managed to write 5,3 lines before committing a spelling mistake while the Swedes students could write 2,9 lines. Similar results were found when comparing their respective unique spelling mistakes, that is, mistakes that are only counted once despite appearing repeatedly in the text.

Thus, spelling is the only feature where the Basque class outperformed the Swedish class. This result was certainly not expected and an explanation needs to be found, or at least, proposed. Given all the observations and all the data gathered for this study, this result may be explained as follows:

- a) Latin vocabulary: While surveying both classes' spelling mistakes in search for a plausible explanation a pattern seemed to emerge: The Swedish pupils misspelled words of Latin origin such as "except", "people", "excellent", "future", "usually", "message", "comfortable" and "compare", which are absent from the Swedish language. Very few similar errors were found in the Basque texts which might be due to their presence in the Spanish language. In consequence, the spelling of the Basque students seems to be facilitated when writing in English.
One might think that the Latin disadvantage is compensated by the large vocabulary of Germanic origin that English and Swedish have in common. The problem is that English is often not spelled as it is spoken which leads to many spelling mistakes despite knowing the word and being able to use it correctly.
- b) The teaching approach: The teaching approach used at school S does not focus on the form of the language as much as other approaches such as the one used at school B. Grammar and dictations on a regular basis are, for instance, part of the teaching approach at school B. Rahimi (2008:45) found that dictation improves passive vocabulary and spelling, which may explain the good spelling of the Basque pupils. Examples of Swedish mistakes that simply do not occur among the Basques are "cheerd" (cheered), "happend" (happened), "beucase" (because), "whit" (with) "fashon" (fashion), "wierd" (weird) and "teetch" (teach).
- c) Simplicity: The Basques' English was poorer and simpler in vocabulary, grammar, syntax, cohesion etc... Thus, the risk of committing errors was lower than in the case of the Swedes.

4.5 General analysis

As to finding reasons for the overall Swedish performance, these can be divided into two groups: in-class factors and outside-class factors. Four factors have been identified as relevant in-class variables in EFL proficiency, and by extension, EFL writing proficiency:

- a) The command of the language: The Swedish teachers were much more proficient in English than their Basque counterparts, which doubtless provides students with an input of higher quality and better learning opportunities. One of the English teachers at school S told me that once she attended an English course for European teachers and that she could not believe that the attending Spanish and French teachers were allowed to teach due to their poor command of the language.
- b) The use of English: Teachers at school S spoke almost exclusively in English, except when giving feedback or explaining grammar. The students did so too. At school B teachers spoke in English but used Basque as well in situations such as reestablishing discipline or repeating instructions. Students too often addressed the teacher in Basque or Spanish with the apparent acceptance of the teacher. According to the European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems (2002:154) only 15% of Spanish teachers always speak English in the classroom whereas 40% of Scandinavian teachers do so. In a country where everything is dubbed, the use of English in the classroom should be maximized to provide EFL input.
- c) The learning environment: The English teachers at school S also managed to keep the pupils silent and focused on the tasks at hand, creating a learning-friendly environment. The Basque teachers were less successful in this area.
- d) Teaching approach/Methodology: There seem to be issues with the teaching approach as well. According to The European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems (2002:55), in Spain the curricular goal of English teaching is learning to communicate, which implies ‘adopting an approach based on communication and geared towards the acquisition of a communicative competence’. Do teachers at school B use such an approach? The approach used in class and its communicative results can be illustrated by the following example: One of the Basque students told me about when he recently entered a store in Prague. When addressed by the store assistant he answered “In English, please” to what she answered “I did”. At that point he panicked and left the store in shame. Minutes later he realized that what the shop assistant had said to him in the first place sounded similar to “Can I help you?”.

At school B speaking and writing are quite neglected whereas at school S they play a slightly more important role in the classroom. Grammar and dictation are regularly used in 4A at school B. The lesson observation confirmed the findings of The European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems in that Spanish teachers very often stick to a textbook and a CD in their lessons. Moreover, 83% of Spanish teachers rarely use additional material such as videos, computers or the Internet in the classroom whereas 50 % of Scandinavian teachers do use them (The European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems, 2002:154).

Once again, in a country such as Spain where barely 3% of students watch TV/movies and chat on-line in English (ISEI-IVEI, 2004:17), where computer games are translated and movies dubbed, it is remarkable that teachers do not use videos, movies or internet in English to maximize the exposure to the language. A possible explanation could be related to their insecurity in English, which stops them from working with certain materials and linguistic situations. An alternative explanation given by the Basque teachers themselves is that most classes are too unruly and undisciplined for a communicative approach to work and accordingly, they turn to strategies that keep the students silent and on task. However, in-class factors do not seem to be the only explanation to the unequal writing performance of Basque and Swedish students and the following outside class factors are intended to shed some more light on the issue:

- a) Language Typology: Swedish and English belong to the Germanic language family while Spanish and English are no more than distant Indo-European relatives with quite different grammar, phonetics, vocabulary... Pongsiriwet states that (2001:75) ‘When the first language and the second language are structurally similar, the first language can be of great use in facilitating the learning of the target language.’ Consequently, Swedish people tend to learn English with less difficulty than Basque people.
- b) Language Input: In Sweden the exposure to the English language is intense and extensive. There are several channels where all TV-programs, movies and series are broadcasted in original version which in 95% of the cases is in English. The cinema and music are also predominantly English-speaking.

In the Basque Country all TV programs, movies and cinema are dubbed into Spanish or Basque. Basque students live in a Spanish or Basque-speaking bubble completely isolated from the English language and culture. As a result and since there is no practical use for English in their everyday lives, Basque students are not so motivated to learn English.

Exposure to the target language is mentioned in Mihaljević & Nikolov (2008:20) as a conclusive success factor in EFL learning and Welff Nantas & Persson (2004:30) observed that Lithuanian students had a much poorer pronunciation than their Swedish counterparts because there was simply no exposure to English outside the classroom. In this respect, it is no coincidence that Sweden, Norway, Denmark and The Netherlands got the highest scores in the study on EFL proficiency carried out by the European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems (2002): They are countries where TV and cinema are not dubbed to their national languages. The actual exposure is, in fact, quite important: 33% of Swedish teenagers watch TV three hours a day and 50% watch between one and two hours a day (SCB, 2003). Most of this TV watching is in English.

- c) Motivation: The extensive presence of English in media and society creates a certain practical need of English among the Swedish population. People feel the need to learn English in order to watch TV, movies, play computer games, understand song lyrics and going abroad on vacation. English is a high prestige language in Sweden, which reflects in that passing English is an academic requirement for entering secondary education. In addition to all this, Swedish people are aware of the fact that their language is not very useful outside Scandinavia. As a result, Swedish pupils might be more motivated to learn English than Basque pupils.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that according to the criteria established in this paper, the Swedish essays are of better writing quality. The Swedish students scored higher in every measured feature with the sole exception of spelling. The syntax, partially due to an extensive and varied use of conjunctions, was more complex, their written production nearly doubled their Basque counterparts' and they employed verbs more skillfully. The spelling exception is suggested to be due to the combined effect of Latin words, teaching focus on form and linguistic simplicity on the part of the Basque class but there might as well be other explanations.

A generalization of these results to the respective national school systems, however, cannot be taken for granted. School B is a public Basque immersion school with mainly working and lower-middle class students whereas school S cannot be considered as a typical Swedish school due to its minority language profile and to being a private school. I was told that the latter is a school with fairly motivated students where discipline and a good learning environment are established and highly valued. In addition, teachers enjoy a high status and respect in the minority culture, which is not the case in the Swedish and Basque cultures. On the other hand, the results of this study seem to confirm the findings of the European Network of policy makers for the evaluation of education systems where the English proficiency of thousands of pupils from eight different countries was assessed. Spanish pupils ended up at the bottom and the Swedish ones at the top in all tested areas, especially in writing proficiency. Accordingly, the results of school B and school S could be generalized to their respective school systems regardless of social class considerations. In 2009 the European Union will carry out a study in order to assess the EFL proficiency of students in all member countries. It remains to be seen whether the results will be in line with the present study or not.

There are several factors that contribute to the better Swedish proficiency in their EFL writing. Among the in-class factors, the use of English, the teacher's command of English, the teaching approach/methodology and the learning environment were mentioned as the main differences between the Basque and the Swedish classes. As we can see, all of them are teacher-related, which appears to support the idea that the quality of teaching is a key factor in EFL proficiency (Mihaljević & Nikolov, 2008:22). On the other hand, the outside class factors affecting EFL proficiency in writing were found to be the linguistic affinities of the respective L1 with English, the exposure to English outside the classroom and student motivation.

What solutions are available to improve the EFL writing proficiency of Basque students? Unfortunately, not much can be done to address their lack of exposure to English unless the Spanish Government decides to abandon dubbing and to start subtitling foreign TV and film productions. Yet, it would take at least a generation before it bears fruit and that alone would not be enough. The teaching profession, on the other hand, can be addressed. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the teacher plays a key role in the EFL classroom and measures should be taken at a national level to improve their skills and preparation. The Basque teachers showed a poorer command of English than Swedish teachers. In this respect, Reves & Medgyes (1994:360) found that the higher the non-native teachers' proficiency in English the less self-conscious, hesitant and insecure they felt. The Basque teachers also seemed to have more difficulties with establishing discipline in the classroom, which inevitably affects the quality of teaching. The English standards should be raised and proficiency tests (especially oral ones) introduced at university level to assure coming generations of well-prepared teachers. Moreover, since there are no means of learning native-like English in the Basque Country, a stay for several months in an English-speaking country should be mandatory to become a teacher. Teaching skills should be taught for teachers to be able to lead and control their class.

There seem to be issues with the teaching approach as well. A more communicative approach has to be implemented in Basque schools, not only because the Spanish Curriculum requires it, but especially because of the lack of opportunities for the students to hear and speak English in their everyday lives. The linguistic incident in Prague is a rather meaningful example. Accordingly, much more attention should be paid to speaking and writing and the lack of exposure to English should be addressed by the use of movies, TV and internet in the classroom. In the last 10-15 years the Basque Government has been funding a trilingual school project where English is introduced as early as in Kindergarten, in an attempt to

improve the English proficiency of future Basque pupils. Modern pedagogical materials are being used and children are said to learn English better and faster than ever before. However, as shown in Mihaljević & Nikolov (2008:20), starting at an early age, more hours or smaller groups are in no way guarantee of success. Unless there is input of quality, more focus on communicative skills and improved teaching skills, this Basque project is doomed to rather limited success.

On the other hand, EFL teaching at school S, or in Sweden, in case a generalization of the results is in order, should pay more attention to spelling, especially words of Latin origin that can be difficult for the students. Given the Swedish society's exposure to English and the similarities between both languages, more time could be allocated to this area in the classroom with no negative effect on the other language skills. In conclusion, it can be said that the poorer writing performance of the Basque class is due to a combination of in-class and outside the class factors, providing their Swedish counterparts with inestimable advantages in EFL learning and writing proficiency.

When considering the limitations of this study it has to be borne in mind that students can always avoid using vocabulary or grammar they are unsure of. Thus, a part of their proficiency might remain undetected. Being designed for Swedish national goals, the essay test itself might have affected the results as well as the Basque syllabus is completely different from the Swedish one. The socioeconomic background might have affected the results as well. At school B, only four of the student's mothers and two fathers have university studies, the rest of the mothers being housewives and the rest of the fathers electricians, truck drivers, plumbers, industry workers etc. Trondman & Bunar (as cited in Pripp, 2006:15) state that lower-middle class and working class pupils manage school worse than other social groups. They usually have poorer cognitive skills and lower motivation, they get lower grades and even when their grades are just fine they choose not to pursue university studies. Students with a middle-class or upper middle-class background tend to perform better in a school environment, which could have played in the favor of the students at school S.

6. Appendixes

Appendix A

SPANISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

AGE	SCHOOL YEAR	
18	University	Non-compulsory education
17	2 Bachelor degree	
16	1 Bachelor degree	
15	4 Secondary	Compulsory education
14	3 Secondary	
13	2 Secondary	
12	1 Secondary	
11	6 Primary	
10	5 Primary	
9	4 Primary	
8	3 Primary	
7	2 Primary	
6	1 Primary	

SWEDISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

AGE	SCHOOL YEAR	
18	3 High School	Non-compulsory education
17	2 High School	
16	1 High School	
15	9 Primary	Compulsory education
14	8 Primary	
13	7 Primary	
12	6 Primary	
11	5 Primary	
10	4 Primary	
9	3 Primary	
8	2 Primary	
7	1 Primary	
6	0 primary	

Appendix B Swedish National Essay test (www.skolverket.se)

Impressions and Experiences

As time passes by we come into contact with many different people. Sometimes we experience very special moments.



Photodisc/Matton Images

Choose ONE of the following topics and write either an answer to the letter below or a text about a special moment in time:

Hi Ohio!

or

One Moment In Time

Hi Ohio!

Students at Montgomery High School in Columbus, Ohio, are doing a project about countries in Europe. Read this letter from the Sweden Project Group and write a letter in reply.

Dear friends in Sweden,

We're working on a European project and we've discovered that we don't know very much about your country and the way you live. Please write back and tell us. And of course we are curious about YOU—who are you and where are you from?

Our high school has about 1,000 students and we have a great football team, a big band and lots of after-school activities. What about your school? And what about the Swedish school system? Tell us what it's like!

Some more questions that we have are:

What is it like to live in your country? What are young people interested in?

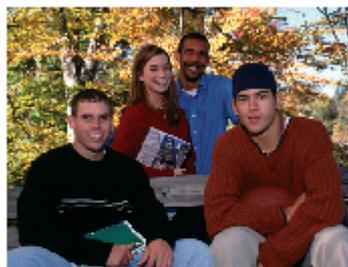
What do people talk about and what do they think is important?

We think that a lot of people get the wrong impression of our country through TV and other media. So we wonder what you know about life in the US.

Finally, what are your plans for the future?

Hope to hear from you soon!

Debbie, Carlos, Said and Tom



<http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/ep9ex.htm>

One Moment In Time

Some moments are more important than others
—to individuals or groups of people.

Write a text about **one** of those very special moments.

YOU decide what to write about.

It could be an important moment or event ...

- in your own life
- or
- in other people's lives

Exempel på provuppgifter, Åp 9 - Engelska
© Skolverket

Appendix C

English curricular goals in Sweden (www.skolverket.se)

Goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school

Pupils should

- understand clear speech, even though regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions concerning familiar conditions and their own areas of interest,
- be able to actively take part in discussions on familiar subjects and with the help of different strategies communicate effectively,
- be able to orally relate and describe something which they have seen, heard, experienced or read, as well as express and give their reasons on how they understand a topic that is of personal importance,
- be able to read and assimilate the contents of relatively simple literature and other narratives, descriptions and texts putting forward argument in subjects they are familiar with,
- be able to ask for and provide information in writing, as well as relate and describe something,
- have a knowledge of everyday life, society and cultural traditions in some countries where English occupies a central position, as well as be able to make comparisons with their own cultural experiences,
- be able to reflect over and draw conclusions about their way of learning English,
- be able to choose and use aids when reading texts, writing and in other language activities,
- be able, on their own and together with others, to plan and carry out work tasks, as well as draw conclusions from their work.

Appendix D

English curricular goals in the Basque Country (provided by school B)

Goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school

READING:

- Answering reading comprehension questions about the text using a long answer.
- Identifying true and false statements about the text.

LISTENING:

- Answering listening comprehension questions about the recorded text.
- Identifying true and false statements about the text.
- Listening to a recording in order to arrange events in chronological order.
- Completing a text with information from a recording.

VOCABULARY:

- Classifying words in categories.
- Matching words with pictures.
- Building sentences with the given words.
- Translating some of the words into Basque/Spanish.

WRITING:

- Writing an essay following a previous model (a letter to a friend, a short autobiography, a recipe, a dialogue).
- Using strategies to present a written assignment such as use of connectors, paragraph organization, spelling and punctuation.

GRAMMAR:

- Writing a text or a sentence using correct verb forms.
- Writing sentences with the given verbs in the correct tense.
- Making a chart with the given verb forms.
- Seeing the relation between the gramatical rule and the sentence use.
- Arranging the words to build correct sentences.
- Writing sentences with information from a chart.

SPEAKING:

- Asking and answering questions in pairs.
- Preparing, practising and performing conversations in pairs following a previous model.
- Giving opinions about given subjects in pairs.
- Talking about given topics in pairs.
- Giving and receiving information about and in given situations in pairs.

Chronological distribution of the goals in the Basque Country

1st term	2nd term	3rd term
<p>GRAMMAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present Simple and Present Continuous. - Present Continuous for future plans. - Past Simple. - Questions words. - Obligation and prohibition with <i>must / have to</i>. - Advice – <i>should / shouldn't</i>. - Past Simple and Past Continuous. - <i>When / while</i>. - Present Perfect + <i>already/ Yet</i>. - Subject / object questions. <p>READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ethnic groups in Britain. - Teenage stress. - A busy e-day. <p>VOCABULARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adverbs of degree. - Common health problems. - Internet words. <p>LISTENING AND SPEAKING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with a radio Presenter. / Ask people about their origins. - An allergy expert. / Visit the doctor. - A conversation about computers. / Agree and disagree. Express opinions. <p>WRITING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Report statistics. <p>English for Citizenship / Biology / Computing.</p>	<p>GRAMMAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passive voice – present and Past. - Comparatives and superlatives. - Past Perfect. - Reported speech. - <i>Say / tell</i>. - Relative pronouns. - <i>So / such</i>. - Question tags. <p>READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urban Utopia. - A good friend? - Body art. <p>VOCABULARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describing cities. - British and American English. - Colloquial expressions. - Feelings. - Adjectives. - Body decoration. <p>LISTENING AND SPEAKING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Find your way. / Ask for and give directions. / Interview with a disabled person. - Describe a problem. / Ask for and give permission. - Decide what to paint. / Share opinions. <p>WRITING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write a letter describing your town. <i>Although, however, what's more.</i> - Write an opinion. <i>On the one hand, on the other hand, at the same time, in my opinion.</i> - Describe something decorative. <p>English for Geography / Ethics / Art.</p>	<p>GRAMMAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First conditional. - Second conditional. - <i>Used to</i> – past habit or states. - The Future. - <i>May / might</i> – possibility. - Time clauses. <p>READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are you consumer-wise? - Welcome to Yellowstone! <p>VOCABULARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Money verbs. - Natural features. Natural disasters. - Vocabulary revision. <p>LISTENING AND SPEAKING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fair trade shops. / Listen to a rap. - Describe holidays. / Choose a holiday. - Revise some communicative situations. <p>WRITING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write a report. - Respond to an advertisement. - Analyse and improve a text. <p>English for Maths / Science / the Curriculum</p>

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