

The Syntax of Written Works of Pupils as a Reflection Towards the Critical Thinking and Active Learning

Prof. Mimoza Gjokutaj

University of Tirana, Albania
Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Albanian Language
Email: mgjokutaj@yahoo.com

Doc. dr. Rozana Rushiti

University of Tirana, Albania
Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Albanian Language
Email: roirushiti@yahoo.com

Dr. Anila Çepani

University of Tirana, Albania
Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Albanian Language
Email: anilacepani@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The article entitled "The syntax of written works of pupils as a reflection towards the critical thinking and active learning" aims to highlight the skills of reflective and critical thinking of pupils through their written works. The study of syntax (text, paragraph, sentence and conjunctions within them) has helped to highlight the linguistic data through which are analyzed the critical and creative skills in benefit of learning of pupils in elementary and secondary education. The article stated to highlight the problems that are displayed through programs and texts in connection with their didactic requirements to bring students to the acquisition of critical thinking skills and a better learning of different scholar subjects through their written text. The research was extended to several elementary and secondary schools. A comparative look between the two levels has enabled to make the differences between them. But a linguistic syntactic analysis of work of pupils has created the opportunity to give some recommendations about the benefit of pupils' writing and about the requirements that must have all scholar curriculums concerning the topic in question. Statistical processing of data has helped too for the final findings and recommendations of the article.

Keywords: critical thinking, active learning, syntactic structure, sentence, essays.

1. Introduction

The initiative of dealing with a problem concerning the investigation of syntax in written assignments of pupils in developing critical thinking comes as a need of the time to enlighten issues related to the linguistic knowledge of pupils and with the development of thinking critically, phenomena that seen within each other make up the profile of the pupil in the actual process of his/her education.

Meanwhile, the offered results from international organizations like PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) concerning the pupils' achievements (in the case of Albania it is low, PISA: 2012) urged to make a study in order to have a clear view of linguistic problems related to syntactical structures shown mostly in pupils' written assignments, through which is observed the development of mental structures, intellectual and linguistic development and especially in aspects of critical and creative thinking.

At the same time, closely related studies have drawn the attention of this work and many other articles in the field of applicative syntax, which makes it urging in the studying of syntactical structures and issues of thinking and expressing, in general, and of critical and creative thinking during the process of pupils and students education, and the benefit of their learning during all their life. The connection of syntax with other structures of thinking, which is the object of this study, opens a new field for our scientific researches in Albanian education, in integrating linguistic sciences in

learning, believing and proving that they interfere mutually into each other.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will help the fulfillment of the objectives and at the same time, will contribute in the improvement of school curricula concerning the development of critical thinking through writing.

Another reason that urged us to make this study is also the fact that contemporary studies in the field of Generative linguistics and in that of critical and creative thinking development which has been conducted for years, have been included in the content of school curricula in Albania, including all the levels of education, from the elementary to the university. These studies and their application in the school subjects have created new experiences that already offer us the possibility to study further their interconnection.

2. Problem of Research

Through this work, is aimed at bringing up useful facts and findings in relation to general linguistic knowledge of pupils through their written abilities; syntactical structure of written assignments, the effect they have on the development of critical, creative and reflective thinking to a better learning in different school subjects; understanding how the knowledge on the language helps them to create related texts starting with the smallest ones, like essays, through linguistic means that enable them to create logical structures; showing the avoidance of phrases in structure formations, that bring confusion to the critical thinking in general and in their communicative expressions, but also in the lexical usefulness of syntactical structure, number of terms, stylistic means, etc.

3. Research Focus

This study is based on and analyzed through the quality and quantity point of view in using syntactical units and means in the function of logical linguistic structures in texts with an a tenable character. For this purpose, there have been collected 100 written assignments, like essays based on arguments, in high schools (elementary –AMU – and high school– AML) 30 from which have been used as a statistical corpus of the study. The choice has been random and representing both groups. Whereas in the division of the levels as selective criterion is used the assessment with a mark made by the teachers. The research is also a partial investigation of 10 units of different texts like: Literature, Albanian Language, Biology, History, in order to observe how the questions have been formed linguistically, how oral and written assignments have been formed in order to develop the critical thinking of pupils.

Observations made in several classes and in the teachers' journals (diary), and records of their written work of students have served as instruments to create corpus of findings in relation to research.

4. Methodology of Research

4.1 General Background of Research

This study has started two years ago. In this period the research is focused on two schools that represent the students of Class IX (AMU, "Ibrahim Brahja" school in Tirana) and Class XII (AML, "Ibrahim Rugova" school, Tirana).

4.2 Sample of Research

Written assignments in the form of arguing essays of pupils in these schools, about 100 studied and 30 analyzed, have served as a material for making quantity, quality and comparative research, to promote further discussion and findings of this research. From a considerable number of essays, there have been selected 5 essays for each group of marks (5-6, 7-8 and 9-10) to make the comparisons easier. This data has been compared to the essays of pupils in Class IX (grouped in the same way) to make apparent the differences concerning the development of expressive abilities in a lower class towards a higher class related to the usage of linguistic structures (texts, paragraphs, sentences and terms). The tables and graphics have served to show the phenomena and to make precise analyses in the syntax of texts, which consequently, lead us to the ways of developing the structures of thinking. It is intended as sufficient review of 10 lessons in each social or science subject have been useful and the attention is concentrated on written assignments with a creative character that enable the development of critical thinking. At this point, there are also considered texts of literature, Albanian language, biology and history, whose selection has been random.

The quantity analysis of the data, shown through tables below, offers a lot of solutions that are part of the quality

aspect concerning the general linguistic and intellectual knowledge of pupils.

Their research, and also those of 50 students in their teaching practice have brought data in the process of teaching during the classes when it is planned for written assignments.

5. Discussion

In these days, in the field of education, the attention is being focused over and over on the field of integrated studies, such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, etc. In addition, a special attention has been paid to the studies of applied and generative linguistics. According to N. Chomsky the main aim of linguistic theory is to explain how children can acquire since early age the grammar of adults. Mainly for the purpose of the emphasis of generative linguistics on inborn principles, the syntactical component has been an important research object in the field of acquiring of the language. Inter-linguistic researches on different aspects of syntactical development have given interesting results and they enlighten the interaction of syntax with other linguistic and extra-linguistic components. Thus, the relation between the acquiring of the language and syntactical varieties is very important. It is also very important the interaction of syntax and the systems of reproduction, like those that support the understanding of language and linguistic reproduction.

Meanwhile, taking into consideration the theories of development of thinking, can be said that thinking critically through widened syntactical structures, includes the perception of ideas and the examination of their effect, their representation in a more detailed way facing also the contrary points of view, the construction of believable systems to prove them and to have an attitude based on these structures.

These attitudes and this reflection serve as the foundation supporting research on the subject of this paper. By putting syntax in the center of the study, it is important to pay attention to the acquiring of syntactical structures during their usage in related texts.

Thus, analysis of the results of this research focuses on the study and use of such syntactical units ranging from text to continue with the paragraph, sentence composed and simple tools to connecting limbs used in written works of pupils that have been under investigation.

6. Paragraphs and Sentences

Review of quantitative and qualitative data in the table below show that pupils of different levels within Class XII (AML) have a relatively progressive difference from one level to the other in the usage of paragraphs and sentences (Respectively, 38.5%, 34.6%, 26.9% paragraphs and 51.1%, 31.2% and 17.8% sentences – in the total of examined essays).

Table 1: The number of paragraphs and sentences

Class	Level Type	Number of paragraphs	Number of sentences	Nr. of simple sentences	Nr. of compound sentences	Nr. of predicative units
XII AML	9-10	20	141	54	87	219
	7-8	18	86	44	42	131
	5-6	14	49	25	24	46
	Total	52 50.5%	276 65.1%	123 71.1%	153 61.0%	396 55.9%
IX AMU	9-10	23	59	21	38	118
	7-8	19	48	15	33	104
	5-6	13	50	19	31	101
	Total	51 49.5%	148 34.9%	50 28.9%	98 39.0%	312 44.1%

The average 3.4 paragraphs for pupil in three levels is very low for a written assignment as an essay, where you ask the pupil to give arguments and to state their opinions about a certain topic. From the aspect of paragraph structures, pupils are of the same level (IX and XII), which shows weakness in the acquiring and usage of texts where arguments must follow one another. This happens because in high schools they do not pay attention to the written assignments. From the quantity aspect there is a big difference in the upper level than to the low level of Class XII (AML) in the usage of sentences (141/86/49 sentences), which shows a big gap in the upper level towards the lower level. In class IX (AMU)

there is no such difference (59/48/50 sentences or in percentage 39.9%, 32.4% and 33.8%), where the lower level and the middle one are close to each other, because the teachers pay attention to written assignments. Starting just by this quantity criterion, can be seen that in high schools there is a creation of individualities that make the difference among levels. The upper level of investigated classes has been developed in a ratio 1/3, intermediate level in ratio 1/2, whereas the lower level does not have any change. This explains the fact that pupils with lower results in high schools but in upper classes have a total lack of acquiring creative activities as written assignments; they do not work on them and they have poor logical structures that are accompanied with a lot of spelling and grammatical mistakes. There is no progress concerning the written aspect.

According to the total number of sentences in these classes is observed that 65.1% of sentences belonging to high school (AML) and 34.9% elementary schools (AMU). This report apparently differs to the pupils of the upper level in high schools in creating texts with very long sentences, with a lot of thoughts and opinions, different than those in the elementary schools. Often it is noticed that pupils do not know how to divide the text in paragraphs, especially those of the lower level in elementary schools, resulting in very long paragraphs with a lot of sentences and sometimes with essays in just two paragraphs. For the high school, there is an average of 5.3 sentences in one paragraph, whereas those of the elementary in 2.9 sentences in one paragraph. This difference grows to the upper level of the high school.

In table.1, it was obvious the place occupied both types of sentences (simple/compound), the number of sentences in relation to simple sentences composed of low level and average pupils in each class. Is accepted, in written assignments compound sentence must dominate the text, which connect the thoughts and ideas and make it possible for the pupil to express arguments, judgments, comparisons and more than that, which cannot be done with simple sentences. But the tables for this report in high school shows that simple sentences are used more at the middle and lower pupils, because these levels have a slower progress than those of upper level. The latter use more compound sentences 61.8% from 38.2% simple sentences, but with about 2.5 predicative units, compared to the middle and lower level (precisely, 48.8% and 49%).

This difference is seen more clearly when the report studied sentences composed, when passing from the upper level to the middle one and the lower one (respectively 56.9%, 27.5% and 15.7%). This highlights that attention should be shown to these levels (middle and lower) to increase the progress in written assignments for a more intellectual development in all levels of knowledge, because language is the product of their education. Besides this difference, in compound sentences of the three levels note that the construction in just 2 predicative units which are not developed further. These types of sentences make the written assignments poorer, without thoughts and without a variety of ideas. At the end of high school pupils lack the desire to write and to deepen the analysis of various issues argument. Written assignments in high schools are very rare, because the curricula has more reproductive requests than in a more creative or investigative aspect.

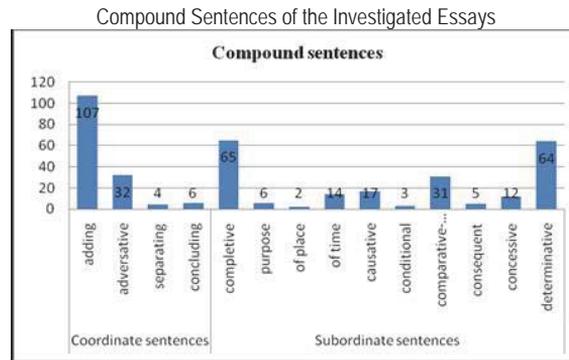
These reports are different in class IX, where note that pupils of three levels use more compound sentences (9-10: 38.2% simple sentences, 61.8 compound sentences; 7-8: 51.2%/ 48.8%; 5-6: 51%/ 49%). As you can see in the reports of the simple sentences towards the compound ones, the difference is close between the middle level and the lower ones of this class. The fact that in the lower high school note a higher percentage of compound sentences, does not necessarily mean that their progress is higher than those of the middle levels, but this frequency in use is connected to structures that are perhaps more accurate, but they are poor in connection to the usage of stylistic means and connective ones, different from those of high school where can be observed widened structures with different terms, especially determinative ones, besides a low number in predicative units. This is noticed more when they are compared to the data in the comparative table of terms between classes (see *table 2* in the comparison of terms).

7. Construction of Compound Sentences

In this study are investigated different kinds of compound sentences that help to judge the structures of thinking related to the intellectual, creative and critical development of pupils. If viewed as essays on the types of sentences composed by two main groups, coordinate and subordinate sentences, note that more sentences of the first group, where within them there are also other groupings. From the observation of the data, seen the pupils of the upper level in class IX have used 31 compound sentences, 25 of which are coordinative. In the middle level of the students there is a ratio 21/15 and at lower students 24/17. Even in total of the essays of this class, a great number of coordinate sentences, that show just orders of structures that are mostly connected to the narrative and descriptive nature of the writing. When talking about separating, contrary and concluding sentences, through which the pupil shows the arguments and opinions, they are less present in the essays of these students (see the below graphic). Comparing it to the essays of class XII, note that the

same phenomenon, the descriptive and narrative aspect in writings. Regarding the subordinate sentences in class IX for the three levels there is a dominant of completive and determinative clauses. In class XII comparative-manner sentences are used more often, which are used to give arguments related to the topic of the subject, whereas it is noticed another phenomenon, that causative and purpose clauses take 10% of the sentences. Thought that in these sentences there must be a predominance of cause-effect connections and their low number shows the inability of the students to argue on the issue and to elaborate on it.

In these kinds of essays, pupils write in simple syntactical structures. The predicative units dominate, especially in descriptions, enumeration and not in cause-effect connections.



8. The Place and Number of Terms in a Sentence

If passed the level of terms within class XII for simple sentences, note that pupils with low results do not use subjects (external argument), which affects the poor representation of the thought and by not using the subject, the thought is not well – developed. The same thing is noticed in objects (inner arguments) and adverbials (adjunctive). There are used a lot of qualifiers, but the usage of qualifiers decreases in students of lower levels. The upper and middle levels have small differences in the usage of these terms. If compared with the data of the class IX, note that an increase in the frequency of secondary terms (objects and adverbials) but there are fewer qualifiers. This happens because pupils in elementary schools do not extend word groups, which is increased in the twelfth class and teenage pupils in high schools, which is more obvious in stylistic expressions, by expanding the number of qualifiers. According to compound sentences, lower level students of class XII have more or less the same number of terms, where note that short sentence structures (6 terms in a sentence). There is a small difference between them and lower level pupils in elementary schools.

Table 2: Number of terms in simple and compound sentences

	Level Type	Nr. of simple sentences	Subjects	Objects	Adverbials	Qualifiers	Nr. of compound sentences	Subjects	Objects	Adverbials	Qualifiers
XII AML	9-10	54	50	52	34	122	87	129	129	69	365
	7-8	44	41	40	39	136	42	86	84	70	229
	5-6	25	23	18	13	61	24	24	30	22	77
	Total	123 71.1%	114 72.6%	110 71.4%	86 62.8%	319 92.5%	153 61.0%	239 60.7%	243 56.8%	161 54.6%	671 90.8%
IX AMU	9-10	21	19	16	16	21	38	54	80	46	29
	7-8	15	12	16	18	5	33	51	49	46	29
	5-6	19	17	14	18	4	31	56	61	47	13
	Total	50 28.9%	43 27.4%	44 28.6%	51 37.2%	26 7.5%	98 39.0%	155 39.3%	185 43.2%	134 45.4%	68 9.2%

In Table 3, there is given the number of terms in simple and compound sentences, whereas in Table 4 there is the number of these terms in all kinds of sentences for both classes.

Table 3: The report of terms in simple and compound sentences

Simple sentences				Compound sentences			
Subjects	Objects	Adverbials	Qualifiers	Subjects	Objects	Adverbials	Qualifiers
157	154	137	345	394	428	295	739

Table 4: The report of terms in a sentence

Subjects	Objects	Adverbials	Qualifiers
551	582	432	1084

9. Conjunctions

A quantity analyses related to the usage of conjunctions, makes us face a fact that supports the argument mentioned above concerning the frequency in using compound sentences in essays of class IX and XII. The report of the conjunctions used in the compound sentences (281/153 high school class and 230/185 elementary school) enlightens that fact of poor structures in class IX, where adding terms are missing and where conjunctions are used only for compound sentences rather than homogenous terms. This linguistic analysis leads us to another finding related to the issue of intellectual and mental education, which tells us about gaps and that they are not conscious about them, which must be corrected in the elementary schools.

If studied the graphics, seen that adding conjunctions are used more often by students of class XII than those of class IX (134/67), which supports the fact of additional number of terms and the expansion of predicative units, so a richer thinking and expression of ideas in this class.

But from the graphics seen in both classes, there is a zero indicator in the usage of conjunctions, which mainly present in lower and middle levels, which is supported once again with the findings above in the construction of texts and sentences.

The comment made above about the frequency of causative and purpose sentences is also supported with the indicator of subordinate conjunctions, which is typical of these construction and the usage in which the indicator is 0 to 2 (see *Table 5*).

Table 5: Different Conjunctions. Comparison between Class XII and IX

Level Type	adding	adversative	separating	concluding	completive	purpose	of place	of time	causative	conditional	comparative-manner	consecutive	concessive	determinative	Total of all kinds	
XII	9-10	71	12	3	2	3	1	0	6	2	0	27	1	3	9	140
	7-8	42	5	0	2	5	0	0	5	4	0	28	0	1	6	98
	5-6	21	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	4	43
	Total	134	19	3	4	8	1	0	11	6	0	71	1	4	19	281
	66.7%	52.8%	50.0%	66.7%	12.1%	16.7%	0.0%	78.6%	40.0%	0.0%	94.7%	20.0%	36.4%	29.7%		
IX	9-10	26	6	2	0	23	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	4	13	82
	7-8	23	4	0	2	17	3	1	0	5	0	1	1	2	18	77
	5-6	18	7	1	0	18	1	0	2	2	3	2	2	1	14	71
	Total	67	17	3	2	58	5	2	3	9	4	4	4	7	45	230
	33.3%	47.2%	50.0%	33.3%	87.9%	83.3%	100%	21.4%	60%	100%	5.3%	80.0%	63.6%	69.3%		

10. Questioning Apparatus in Textbooks

The linguistic formation of pupils, in a higher level depends on the requests of the curriculum which deals with its reflection in independent creative and reasoning written works.

The study is focused on textbook exercises column about the questions provided: questions, writing tasks in the classroom or home, office or reflection character creation. The object of the research was focused on 4 textbooks of Human and science aspects in classes IX and XI. This is made to have a more comparative approach, which is also the purpose of the study. This selection is made randomly, studying only the pedagogical apparatus in these books.

The following observation allows extracting some comments about this issue.

Table 6: Organization of the exercises in the text

Albanian Language and Literature				Albanian Language				Biology and Health Education				History of Civilization				Total of 4 books			
Lessons 1-10				Lessons 1-10				Lessons 1-10				Lessons 1-10				Total			
Questions		Reflecting Assignments		Questions		Reflecting assignments		Questions		Reflecting assignments		Questions		Reflecting assignments		Questions		Reflecting assignments	
open	closed	oral	written	open	closed	oral	written	open	closed	oral	written	open	closed	oral	written	open	closed	oral	written
23	50	58	25	20	35	70	27	12	16	18	3	26	66	20	7	81	167	166	62

Note that from the four books that were investigated (10 lessons for each of them), there is dominance of closed questions, which require short answers and do not urge the reasoning ability of the pupil, but all it requires is just a reproduction of the lesson. Even considering the assignments (oral or written), there is a dominance of oral assignments, which limit the inclusion of all the pupils in the same situations and all that is brought is short phrases, or lack of response, or even allowing only the “leaders” of the class to answer the questions. Meanwhile, in written assignment, where all the students are included, there is a small amount of questions.

This short look on the curricula makes us draw the conclusion that school curricula have problems in their linguistic formation concerning written assignments with a creative and thinking character, which need working products related to the texts of the pupils.

This conclusion speaks about issues that have to do with a rethinking in the aspect of texts formations and the difficulty in learning them, starting with the terminology, which is mostly very aggravated, to the rethinking of pedagogical apparatus and accompanying exercises, which apparently lack an empirical nature of their construction. In these sets of lessons the way that the questions are made to the pupils must be reconsidered, from the structure and linguistic aspect, that need a new point of view and which leads the pupil to a more researching and thinking learning, orally or written, and which makes the pupil more successful and apt.

11. Teacher’s Role and Assessment

Another very big issue concerning written assignments of pupils and the development of critical thinking is related to the teacher, his/her role in such cases as choosing the topic or other models of writing, to give them the time of completing the assignment, recommends the sources to be taken into consideration, how he/she acts towards the assessments, how objective he/she is towards them, the criteria he/she uses to make such assessments, according to the type of assignment.

Regarding the topic choice note from the texts and teachers, it is recommended to work on topics that very often go further the perceptive capacities of pupils, and often accompanied with a lack of sources, which are suitable for their accomplishment. Also, note that in some classes where they have worked on some written assignments, there is a lack of time in accomplishing the task. As a consequence, most of the written assignments are short, not finished, without convincing arguments and written very quickly, where you can notice a lot of mistakes in spelling and grammar.

It is often a lack in recommending sources before the task and this makes the pupils base only on what they know in general about the topic, which can be very poor, which brings a lack in references and notes (citations), what does not permit the reasoning and critical thinking of the issue.

From some observations made in classes, it is noticed that teachers do not know very well the strategies and techniques of critical development, which has not been missed the practices in Albanian schools; there are enough sources for teachers of all levels to know these methods, of course through continuous trainings that a lot of governmental and non-governmental organizations have offered.

In the case of assessing written assignments, note some phenomena: they are assessed very quickly from the teachers, there are not actual problems made obvious to the pupil, there is no place for the improvement of the assignments, often they are left not assessed and as a consequence, this makes the pupils more indifferent towards them, so they do not even accomplish them.

To make these ideas more obvious, it is enough to read the notes teachers make to the assessments in written assignment that have been taken into consideration in this article.

Table 7: Teacher's assessment

Structure	Content	Grammar	Spelling/punctuation	General
Structure: introduction, body, conclusion	You have good thoughts, but they are not constructed very well related to their meaning.	Sentences of different types	Grammatically correct	You worked well
Be careful in the division of the paragraphs	You have good thoughts, but you must put the sentences on paper after you are clear and convinced.	There are cases when the continuation of the sentence is a habit (just to write a long sentence)	Grammatically correct	A good job
The beginning of a new paragraph must be obvious	You are not concentrated on the topic	Simple and compound sentences.	Spelling mistakes	
There is no division in paragraphs	There are not enough arguments.	Different kind of sentences	Correct spelling	
	Good ideas.	Simple sentences.	A lot of grammatical mistakes.	
	Very poor ideas	Sentences are not finished.	A few spelling mistakes	
	Poor arguments and not convincing	Weak construction of sentences		
	Sentences contradict one another, from what is said in the beginning and what is said at the end.	Be careful in the relation Subject - Verb		
	Repetition of ideas			
	Poor ideas			
	Most of the sentences are just a "beat round a bush".			
	Ideas and sentences are correct			

12. Conclusions

The results of the analyses and discussions indicated that pupils (Class IX - AMU and XII -AML) remain at the same level, according to the structure of paragraphs, which tells about the weakness in acquiring and using the related texts, where arguments must follow one another and must be connected through conjunctions. In general, in our school tradition there is not paid too much importance on written assignments, which is more obvious in AML. Regarding the quantity, is noticed that in upper levels of high schools there is some "individuality" created that make the difference with the other levels. The lower level, comparing the upper levels of the classes does not have any progression.

From the point of view of quantity, the upper level of class XII (AML) uses more sentences, what shows a big gap between the upper level and the lower one. In class IX (AMU) it is not noticed this difference, where the lower level is very close to the middle one, because the requests of the teachers for written assignments are almost the same and there is not too much difference, which shows about a non-strategic work made with the text and paragraphs.

The attention must be concentrated on the increase of progress in students of lower and middle levels, because there are great differences in the usage of compound sentences, respectively according to the three levels. The dominance of copular, completive and determinative clauses with structures that are just ordered one after the other and the lack of causative sentences and purpose sentences shows the lack in connections cause-effect and as a consequence, the inability to give arguments and to reflect on an issue, in order to give ideas in different levels of critical and creative thinking.

Regarding to the terms in a sentence, it is observed the lack in expanding main groups of sentences with other terms (external arguments, inner arguments, adjuncts). Even though there is noticed a progress from year to year (from level to level), this is evident only in the intense usage of qualifiers compared to other terms, which does not allow the pupil to develop his/her judgment and reasoning.

The development of critical thinking through school curricula (texts) shows weakness mainly in linguistic knowledge in the written works and assignments with a creative and reflective character. Based on this, it is shown the need to rethink about the curricula in linguistic formations of texts, starting with the terminology which is sometimes very difficult, to the rethinking of pedagogical apparatus and exercises, which lack empirical and reasoning composition. The questions and exercises (oral/written) in the texts must be examined again from the linguistic and structural point of view, in order to lead pupils towards demanding and thinking learning, thus making them more successful.

Based on the findings of this study, through the analysis of the quantity of linguistic means, it has been seen a poor approach of pupils in using them during critical thinking. As a consequence, it is time to make deeper studies concerning syntax in school curricula in general, and of assignments and exercises within their structure, through the usage of more linguistic and stylistic means, starting with the paragraph, sentences, terms, conjunctions, etc., considering them as keys to open the route towards critical thinking.

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