

Research plan: BYLEC - Baltic Young Learners of English Corpus

A multidisciplinary study with six universities and some twenty schools in five countries in the Baltic Region on young learners' current use and learning of the English language

Background

The interest in the present project lies in the compilation of comparable sub-corpora produced by learners with a range of different mother-tongue backgrounds in the Baltic region and the ways teachers apprehend teaching writing in EFL. The collection of data is to be in line with the systematic approach to corpus design of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) (Granger 1994; 1996). The present project would bring together data produced by foreign language learners and learners of institutionalized second-language varieties of English together with teachers' experiences and reflections.

The ICLE: www.uclouvain.be/en-cecl.html

A good overview of learner corpora is found at www.uclouvain.be/en-cecl-icWorld.html

Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA) is the framework to adhere to in the present research. CIA thus concerns varieties of the same language, in this case English, L2 versus L2 and the different varieties of learner language (Granger 1996: 43). Comparable native speaker data to be used in the present project would be the data available in LOCNESS in the ICLE.

In the organization of the collection we will start by adhering to the principles and methods of the UCLE (Uppsala Corpus of Learner English) (Johansson and Geisler 2011).

Purpose

The purpose is to invest in a corpus of international learner English with data from 12-year-olds in the Baltic Region in order to investigate their English language to identify differences in their interlanguage which are of significance for their written proficiency in English and successful lingua franca communication. The focus is on the interlanguage of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Swedish learners of English.

Research questions

What are the specific productive patterns of young learners' second language production in these five countries?

What intercultural aspects, societal factors and native language interference could explain the identified variation in learner language?

What features of spoken English and digital communication emerge in their written production such as discourse markers, emoticons, traits from texting messages, multiple causal coordination and informal vocabulary?

What are the pedagogical implications for classroom work with writing in English of these identified differences?

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Kaliningrad school number 1

Number of students at the primary schools

Sweden

SE-A	Norrbackaskolan	25 students
SE-B	St Hansskolan	24 students
SE-C	Kräklingbo skola	13 students
SE-D	Skarpnäcksskolan	?
Total		62 students

Latvia

LV-A	Daugavpils Saskanas Pamatskola	25 students
LV-B	Daugavpils Basic School Nr 11	25 students
LV-C	Daugavpils Vienibas Pamatskola	20 students
LV-D	Daugavpils Krievu Vidusskola - licejs	28 + 29 students
LV-E	Riga	12 students
Total		139 students

Lithuania

LT-A	Kaunas Senamiestis Middle School	45 + 45 students
LT-B	Kaunas Jonas and Petras Vileisiai Middle School	34 students
Total		124 students

Estonia

EE-A	Tartu Karlova School	34 students
EE-B	Tartu Tamme School	34 students
EE-C	Narva Pähklikimäe Gymnasium	36 students
EE-D	Narva Keeltelütseum	13 students
Total		117 students

Russia

RU-A	Kaliningrad school number 21	29 students
RU-B	Kaliningrad school number 8	28 students
RU-C	Russian Orthodox Gymnasium, Kaliningrad	18 students
RU-D	Kaliningrad school number 1	30 students
Total		105 students

Project plan

May – August 2015

Research plan is defined in cooperation with all partners

September 2015

Travels are organized by project leader to inform and engage schools and universities in the data collection in workshops, starting in September 2015. At these workshops, suggested topics for written production are presented and formulated in detail. These topics are to start with taken from the material of the Swedish National Tests of English for grade 6 and from textbooks for the age group but modified after discussions with Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian teachers in order to be suitable in all countries. Teachers who have signed up to participate in the project are given methodological material (Keaveney and Lundberg 2014 *Early Language Learning and Teaching: A1-A2*) for this age group with ideas about the writing skill at level A2 of the CEFR. Furthermore, there are discussions about how to work with written proficiency particularly with low-achievers of level A1 and A2.

Possible follow-up workshops in May 2016 with additional material provided to those teachers who completed the data collection. Travels are organized as much as possible within the framework of Erasmus and Nordplus.

October 2015

The personal profiles on the students are sent to the project leader.

October – December 2015: Part 1 in the collection of data

Learners' production of English is gathered in a common database. The learners' productions are either written directly by the young learners into the database or written by hand and then sent by post or scanned and e-mailed to the project leader.

When there is sufficient data available an assistant is employed at 50% for three months at Uppsala University, Campus Gotland to transcribe and assemble the data (possible candidate: Gabriella Ekman, Ph D).

November 2015: Workshop in Visby for the categorization and corpus collection of the texts in www.sketchengine.co.uk

January – April 2016: Part 2 in the collection of data

There is a continued collection of learners' production. There can now be a start of pilot studies and analyses of linguistic features in the learners' production.

May 2016

There are final workshops with teachers at primary schools in the five countries with an evaluation of the collected material and a discussion of the inclusive aspects of teaching young learners written proficiency.

May – September 2016

Summarizing and concluding. Publication of material. At least one scientific article is published.

University lecturers' duties in the project

The university lectures are to provide contacts with teachers and schools in the regions and organize a first (Workshop I, September 2015) and a final workshop (Workshop II, May 2016) with the teachers. The university lecturers have full access to the data for their own research and students' bachelor and master theses writing. The data can be the source for research and publications.

School teachers' duties in the project

The school teachers make their learners produce texts which are either written directly into the database with the help of the link, or sent in e-mail (scanned) or sent by mail to the project leader. The texts are written during lessons at school and the estimated time for writing one text is between 40 and 60 minutes. The number of participating learners is some 100 learners

per country and the number of participating schools would be 2 to 4 depending on the size of the school and the number of classes with 12 year-olds.

The learners will be anonymous but at the start they will be asked to provide their background data such as name, age, mother tongue, their parents' mother tongue, visits to foreign countries, attitude to English. In the project the individual learner will be identified with a code such as "LV-A-2".

Teachers are requested to get the parents' permission for the use of their children's texts in this research project. The children are guaranteed to be anonymous and that the texts will only be used for research purposes and published anonymously at a common website.

The teachers are requested to write reflections after the completion of each text because it would be valuable if teachers could keep a log for reflections on what happens in their class/group in relation to the project as a whole and especially if you could make some notes after the lessons when texts are produced. This implies that teachers are kindly requested to write in a "reflection-log" at least three times during the autumn semester and three times during spring. Finally, in May, when all six texts are produced, teachers will be asked to go through the reflections written during the year and write a meta-reflection of what you have seen, learnt etc. Further information is to come.

This is a kind of collaborative work and hopefully teachers can use their reflections in discussions in your "working-team" at your school. We also hope these reflection-logs will be useful as tools for formative assessing in your classes.

When the first text is produced and sent in we would appreciate comments from you if everything worked out well, if there were any problems in any way and if you think major changes have to be considered in order to be able to continue with the project. ---

Some suggestions for writing in the reflection-log:

- How did you prepare the students before each lesson with text writing?
- What did you notice in the classroom or among students before, under and after the students were writing? Did you notice anything special?
- Are all students involved in the text writing? What about students with special educational needs? Would you say they are included in this? Are there any difficulties? What are the reasons?

The learners are to produce six texts; three in the autumn semester and three in the spring semester. The project does not imply an emphasis on teaching the written skill in the classrooms and the texts are not produced for assessment purposes. Nevertheless, the learners should be asked to do their very best and that their production is important and taken into account as a whole to motivate the learners to do their very best and that the production really reflects their actual level. The teachers are simply requested to collect learners' production for research purposes. It is worth emphasizing that the conditions for production are to be similar

as similar as possible in the classrooms of the five countries. This means that instructions should be clear and similar, e.g. for the permission of using and actually having dictionaries at hand. The topics are to be developed and decided at Workshop I with the teachers. Here are the six topics:

The topics of the learners' texts

Autumn semester 2015

Essay 1: My best friend (The topic and questions below are from Zergollern-Miletic 2015.)
(Deadline: October 15, 2015)

What is your friend's name? How old is your friend? Where does your friend live? Has your friend got brothers and sisters? Has your friend got any pets? Which? What does your friend look like? Do you see your friend very often? What do you do with your friend when you are together? Why is he/she your best friend? What else can you say about your best friend?

Essay 2: My pet (real or imaginary) (Deadline: November 15, 2015)

Essay 3: A place that I like (Deadline: December 15, 2015)

Spring semester 2016

Essay 4: An adventure/the journey of my dreams (Deadline: February 15, 2016)

Essay 5: My favourite website/computer game/app. The learners will be invited to play the game Minecraft with international participants prior to the production of the text. (Deadline: March 15, 2016)

Essay 6: Me in the world in the future, (sustainability, peace, dreams) (Deadline: April 15, 2016)

In the formulation of the topics it is important to consider what linguistic features will be prompted.

Instructions

Instructions for the teacher and the learners' writing were distributed and discussed at Workshop I

Certificate

After the completion of the project school teachers will receive a certificate from Uppsala University, Sweden which gives information about the school teacher's contribution in the research project.

The data

The aim is to have a collection of texts for two school years with new groups of learners the second year in each country. The first collection is to be from September 2015 to May 2016 and the second collection from September 2016 to May 2017. After the completion of the whole project from 2015 to 2017, the result would be a learner corpus of 100 000 words / per country. A pilot study carried out in November 2014 on 100 Swedish 12 year-olds indicates that an essay by this age group can comprise between 50 and 300 words. The average length of an essay would be some 100-150 words. An approximate figure would be 100 words per essay when we also include learners with difficulties in English.

This means that on average every young learner would produce at least some 600 words every school year. What is realistic to administer is a number of **50 to 100 learners per country**. This would mean that with some 100 learners, and every learner writing at least 600 words in his/her six essays throughout the school year, would provide at least some **60 000 words per country**. With some dropouts, fewer than 100 students and difficulties in collecting the data we may estimate 50 000 words the first research year. The second year the collection is repeated to reach **the goal of 100 000 words per country** and all in all **500 000 words in the corpus of the whole project**.

Research and publishing

All the researchers in the project have access to the learners' production and can in this way carry out linguistic analyses. This can be done in terms of case studies of grammatical structures, lexical items or chunks (cf case studies in Granger 1996). As a material for comparisons of occurrences and frequencies, the ICL A is used (cf above). As a result the case studies are published in a book in 2017 financed by means from the project. Researchers are offered to publish their research in this volume. Two pilot studies on young Swedes' learner language are being worked were completed in 2015: Swedish young learners' uses of the preposition *on* (bachelor thesis at Uppsala University) and Swedish young learners' uses of the third person-s in writing (Sundh 2015). These studies are based on the collection of Swedish young learners' essays collected in November 2014.

It is possible to work in a way so that each university, with the bachelor and master students' work on their theses, chooses one aspect of the collected texts and in this way can focus on this linguistic or pedagogic aspect. These aspects could be the connected to language structures, discourse, or learning the writing skill with pedagogical implications.

Preliminary and suggested dates for Workshop I

There will be separate workshops in every country. The length of the workshop is two hours when information is provided about the project and the school teachers can share ideas and how to make the learners' production as rich as possible.

The date of the workshops in Sweden: August 2015

The date of the workshop in Kaunas Lithuania: September 28-30

The date of the workshop in Tartu: September 23-24 (Stellan Sundh and Fia Andersson)

The date of the workshop in Kaliningrad: September 17-18

The date of the workshop in Daugavpils, Latvia: September 28-30

Questions to consider

The linguistic analyses: Can we have the same system in all countries when normalising the linguistic frequencies in the analyses, e.g. a common system: having the number of instances divided by the total number of words and then multiply by 100?

References

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Granger, Sylviane (1994) The Learner Corpus: a revolution in applied linguistics. *English Today* 10, pp.25-33

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