The Effects of Linguistic Competencies and Civic Literacy on Political Decision-making in School – First Results of the Interdisciplinary Project, “SchriFT II”

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Abbreviations
SchriFT I and II = “Writing in Subject Lessons Including Turkish in Lower Secondary Education,” funded by the BMBF research cluster “multilingualism and language education,” https://www.uni-due.de/schrift/

BMBF = German Federal Ministry of Education and Research
Abstract

The ability to form political judgements and to make decisions is a key competence for the political participation of citizens in democracy. This study is based on the results of “SchriFT II” project, which finds that missing literal competences constitute a disadvantage for success in school and political participation, especially when connected with a migration background (multivariate analysis t(305)=3.385, p<.001, r=.19). We assume that text-genre based epistemic writing, which connects linguistic action patterns with linguistic expressions, is an effective instrument for encouraging language and subject-integrated learning. In the pilot study, we examine the political knowledge and decision-making skills of students in secondary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia.

German Synopsis

The ability to form political judgements and to make decisions is always a requirement for politically mature actions, and the opportunity to apply conceptual political knowledge to different controversies is therefore a key competence for reasonable political participation of citizens in democracy. The competence debate in Germany led to the formulation of a model of political competence (Detjen et al. 2012) that includes four dimensions: knowledge, participation, attitudes/motivation and decision-making. Value-based decisions can be characterized as a problem-solving process that involves knowledge and a discussion of pro and cons and that leads to a final judgement or a decision for or against a political issue. Manzel & Weißeno (2017) developed this model further: they suggest that in addition to individual factors, domain-specific and general factors such as epistemological beliefs, language, and rhetoric skills influence political judgement (p. 71). The ability to argue for or against a political issue in a controversial discussion depends on civic literacy (Habermas 1978).

To enable students to take part in civic discourse, subject-specific language skills have to be imparted. In German lower secondary education, civic education is mainly an “oral” subject without written exams. Only in upper secondary education do students of civic education occasionally sit written tests. Studies show that there is a competence gap in subject-specific writing skills. In particular, students with migration backgrounds, such as Turkish immigrants or children of Turkish immigrants, as well as students with a low socioeconomic status lack the necessary language skills (Manzel & Nagel 2018, Goll et al. 2010). Domain-specific language support is a big benefit in knowledge acquisition (Weißeno & Eck 2011). Text genres and linguistic action patterns play an important role in acquiring writing skills. Linguistic action patterns, such as describing, explaining, and reasoning (Ehlich & Rehbein 1986) require specific language elements at word, sentence and text level (Becker-Mrotzek & Böttcher 2006). Such patterns have a cultural imprint, are modeled in social contexts, and serve as instruments for organizing, structuring and presenting subject knowledge. Therefore, subject learning and language learning condition one another, so that even in subject teaching the importance and function of language must be considered (Becker-Mrotzek et al. 2013, Manzel 2015, Beese & Benholz 2013).

**Theoretical Background**

Today’s mass media report on political, economic and social issues. A so-called fourth power, their function is not only to inform the public, but also to articulate public opinion as well as to control and criticize politicians and other social and economic actors. As the OECD (2018)
states, media literacy is essential for citizens and must be developed in school to enable students to draw on and combine the disciplinary knowledge and modes of thinking acquired in schools in order to ask questions, analyze data and arguments, explain phenomena, and develop a position concerning a local, global or cultural issue (Boix Mansilla & Jackson 2011).

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze and critically evaluate media messages, as well as to create new media content (Buckingham 2007, Kellner & Share 2005). Media content is transferred via audio, video or texts. In general, texts are used in different contexts, and they play an important role in human communication and interaction. With domain-specific texts, people not only transfer and produce knowledge but also reflect on it. The theory of functional pragmatic linguistics focuses on texts that are typical in a particular domain to identify typical language procedures in order to improve knowledge acquisition and language skills. But “only the understanding of the content of a text can transfer information into knowledge and helps to construct a net of meaningful context knowledge” (Mandl et al. 1998, p. 6). The understanding of a text depends on the producer, the recipient, and the communication context. Therefore, a text is not a random product (Püschel 1997), but the result of cognitive processes, selection strategies, and language procedures.

Brinker (2005) defines texts as “a limited series of linguistic symbols, which are themselves coherent and have a communicative function” (p. 17). If texts contain similar characteristics, forms, and aims, and if they are used in similar communication contexts, then they can be categorized as special types of texts. Fix (2000) states that members of a social or cultural community use special types of texts routinely (p. 55f.). They use internalized linguistic patterns and typical wordings. In the sphere of politics and the mass media, there is a large spectrum of types of texts (Klein 2011, p. 289).

For political learning processes, two types of texts are relevant: assertive und directive texts. Assertive texts provide information (Rolf 1993). Political issues, problems, and processes are described and explained. Examples are news items, reports, articles in magazines, or interviews. Directive texts are intended to encourage or move readers towards an action, or to discourage or steer them away from it, e.g. laws, proclamation and leaflets.

Domain-specific language education is structured by a systematic classification and connection of cognitive functions, knowledge processing, and linguistic action patterns (Redder 2013). Successful learning in politics manifests in political knowledge and in the ability to argue and to make decisions, amongst other competencies (Detjen et al. 2012, p. 29f., Weißen 2010). While knowledge comprises single facts and data, conceptual knowledge combines elements
of different data and different contexts into meaningful knowledge. Technical terms are connected via language and can build a semantic network. Students can show this ability in producing coherence (proven, for example, with texts in other domains Becker-Mrotzek et al. 2015).

But each domain and each type of text requires different linguistic action patterns which need to be practiced in subject lessons. To articulate one’s own standpoint, to argue for or against a political issue, or indeed to make a decision, students use linguistic action patterns such as describing, explaining, arguing, reasoning and critical thinking, which count among the core competencies of discourse (Vollmer 2011). In this study, the focus is on the identification of four cognitive-linguistic action patterns: naming, describing, explaining, and reasoning. In contrast to the discourse function of “describing,” the discourse function of “naming” does not need to characterize events, processes and facts with regard of their function and relationship. It is more about identifying a context, about selecting a single piece of information out of a mass of phenomena, or about collecting relevant facts out of a number of similar events by using adequate linguistic patterns (i.e., labeling) (Vollmer 2011, p. 5).

The discourse function of “describing” incorporates comparisons of domain-specific facts, problems, and issues, alongside given characteristics, e.g. the functioning of a government. In SchriFT I, students had to decode information from graphs or tables in order to explain political issues and interrelations to a person who did not know anything about them.

The discourse function of “explaining” involves the naming and explaining of backgrounds and origins of situations, phenomena, or processes (ibid., p. 7). Typical discourse functions in the field of politics are designed to systematically describe complex political issues in order to explain the structure of a political system or process, such as: a) laws; b) the function and effect of political issues; c) the role of political actors with their interests and aims; and d) decision-making processes where positions diverge based on values and other effects. Patterns of explanation can contain causal or modal elements (“It is about democracy because people can vote”) or can relate to effects (consecutive) and aims (“A party needs politicians, who are elected to represent the opinion of the party in public.”).

Those action patterns require specific language elements at word, sentence and text level (Becker-Mrotzek & Böttcher 2006). The linguistic action patterns of “reasoning” are characterized by comprehensible action steps (Gohl 2006), action-justification (Ehlich & Rehbein 1986), position-taking by using subject-specific concepts, and the reconstitution of deviant positions (Tindale 2013).
**Empirical Findings**

Theoretical thinking about the connection between subject language, content knowledge, and motivation/interest has been systematically put on the agenda of the didactics of politics since 2013 (see Oleschko & Manzel 2015, Manzel 2015, Weißeno 2013). Richter (2006) presented a research approach for working towards civic reading competence for students in which she mentioned the endeavor of modeling a writing competence also for the teachers (p. 55).

Weißeno & Eck (2012) show that especially students with migration backgrounds can be supported in their knowledge acquisition via fostering domain-specific language skills. But in general, they do have lower results in political knowledge tests (Goll, Eck, Richter & Weißeno 2010) and in writing tests exploring their common language skills (Haag, Böhme & Stanat 2012, Schwippert, Wendt & Tarelli 2012). There are also negative gender effects. Girls have better language competencies than boys (Phillip 2015, p. 43). But in the content knowledge test in the subject of politics, there are divergent findings regarding gender (Boeser 2002, Oberle 2012, Weißeno & Eck 2013). Additionally, the effect of motivation and political interest is proven to have a positive effect on knowledge acquisition (Weißeno & Landwehr 2015, 2017).

Oleschko (2017) compares graphs and tables used in teaching materials in history, politics and geography lessons, but the interdisciplinarity of the subjects impedes a didactical approach to drawing conclusions regarding the subject of politics in isolation. Michalak, Lemke & Goeke (2015) discovered large language and content heterogeneities in their case studies through the use of graphs (p. 134).

**Pilot of SchriFT II**

The aim of the main study is to examine the effects of developing writing skills via a “types of texts” approach on political decision-making and judgement. Before implementing the intervention through argumentative discussions (pre–post-design), two instruments, a knowledge test and a writing test in the subject (two versions each, test A and test B) were tested in a pilot study. The political knowledge test of SchriFT I, based on the POWIS scale, was too difficult for the students in grade 7 and 8, and only reached reliabilities of Cronbach’s alpha = .66, so new test items were constructed. The new scales of the knowledge test were constructed around the four topics of democracy, the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany, the environment, and child labor. Test A contained 32 items, test B contained 26
items. In the writing test, students had to solve four tasks using the three linguistic action patterns (describing, explaining and reasoning) for two topics: child labor (A) and environment (B).

The research focus is on the following questions: What level of political knowledge and civic literacy do students in grade 7 and grade 8 have? What kind of linguistic action patterns do they use to make a decision in a political controversy? What level of writing skills do they have?

Table 1: Test instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>scales</th>
<th>format</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Test: 32 items (A) 26 items (B)</td>
<td>- democracy</td>
<td>paper pencil test with multiple choice single select items</td>
<td>Item analysis, Quantitative analysis (SPSS)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- political system Germany</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- child work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Test: text and 4 tasks</td>
<td>- child labour</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis, category based with anchor examples</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- environment</td>
<td>Rater: N = 5 (collaborative organized)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IRR: k = 0.2 - 0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-Test</td>
<td>paper pencil test</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SES-Questionnaire</td>
<td>paper pencil test</td>
<td>quantitative analysis (SPSS) t-tests</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation Questionnaire</td>
<td>- Interest in politics</td>
<td>paper pencil test</td>
<td>quantitative analysis (SPSS) t-tests</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Interest in child labour</td>
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<td>- Interest in environment</td>
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The first sample of the pilot contained 7 classes (grades 7 and 8) of 4 secondary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) with a sample size of 166 students altogether. Of these, 87 students took part in test version A, and 78.3% of this group had a migration background. 79 students took part in test version B, and 72.6% of this group had a migration background.

**Results**

The quantitative analysis of the knowledge test showed that both content knowledge tests (A and B) were comparable, but that the items were too easy to answer (mean of correct answers: 70%). This might have been due to the proximity to fifth and sixth graders’ knowledge. The best items of the test were selected (reliability, IRT WrightMap) and put together with some new items out of the questionnaire of the commission of federal countries for education planning and research funding (Abs et al. 2007) into one new knowledge test with 33 items for
a second pilot test. In the second pilot with N=207 students, reliability increased to a Cronbach’s alpha = .776. Item difficulty was normally distributed (mean 44.38, SD 16.1).

The writing tests were analyzed qualitatively by five trained raters with a category-based manual including anchor examples. The validity of the category system for evaluating the high-inference coding increased noticeably in the second pilot from k =.04 up to k =.07.

The example in Figure 1 shows the results of a very good student who reached 20 of 28 points. The translation is as follows: “In my opinion, it’s partially yes and partially no. Partially yes, because children need their childhood in order to gather experiences. Children should have a nice start to their life and should enjoy it. Children shouldn’t have to start to work and to worry about money at a young age. Partially also no, because there is a reason. The families need money, and the children help with that. So, my opinion is divided, but if I had to make a decision, I would say that it should be illegal because children need their childhood.” Thus, in the introduction, he cannot clearly position himself, partly because of the different perspectives that he is considering. He names the family and children as political actors, and he cites money and the financial situation as a driving motive. In his reasoning, his value is justice. The student weighs up his arguments and uses modal verbs (would, should) as well as several conjunctions (because, and, but, in order to).
But in general, the results in writing test A were low. In the mean, students achieved only 34% of all points. On average, girls achieved more points than boys, but the significance is weak \((p = .074)\). Students without a migration background achieved better results than first-generation migrant students, and there is also a significant difference between first- and second-generation migrant students.

We found positive correlations between the grade achieved in the subject of politics and the writing test results, especially in the reasoning task. Students had an independent opinion of their own \((73.1\%)\), but just 19.5% considered an opposing position, and even fewer students used arguments to dispute their own position \((9.8\%)\). 78% of the surveyed students did not use political values to argue. With regard to linguistic action patterns, 52.4% of students used the type of “cohesion” once, and 42.7% used it at least twice. We also found positive correlations between subject-specific knowledge and writing competence (reasoning) of \(.344^{**}, p < 001\). These are moderate hints in support of the assumption that political knowledge is a basis for domain-specific literacy.

Having confirmed the validity of both test instruments, we began the intervention proper in politics lessons. In particular, we expected that scaffolding approaches with the three phases of the genre cycle (deconstruction, joint construction, independent construction, see Knapp & Callaghan 1989) would improve the individual writing skills of the students in a given subject.

**Figure 2: Genre cycle (Callaghan & Knapp 1989, Martin & Rose 2005)**
Other test instruments for the main study were the C-test for general language competencies and an SES-questionnaire. The project was embedded in the interdisciplinary project SchriFT II and aimed to investigate transfer effects. First, best practices with the material were developed (Luft et al. 2015, 20017, free download under www.cives-school.de); moreover, teacher training courses were conducted as an integral part of the project.

References


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