Evolving in confidence: writing across basic schooling

Carlos A. M. Gouveia
University of Lisbon
&
Institute for Theoretical and Computational Linguistics
Portugal

Abstract: The paper examines two contradictory findings in the most recent systemic functional linguistics literature on writing development in school years: one, that from year four to year six student’s texts show a greater range of clause types and clause interdependencies, and two, that in the same years there is little or no development in the children’s writing. A description and analysis of the lexicogrammatical structures of 800 student’s texts was carried out. Written in Portuguese as L1, the texts were produced in the national examinations for year 4 and year 6 and were authored by students assessed with the highest mark. The analysis dealt mostly with clause type, clause interdependencies and circumstances (via Adjuncts in the clause and enhancing clauses in the clause complex). The results show that while there seems to be little or no development from year 4 to year 6 (lower values in lexical density, more simplexes and less clause complexes, for instance), year 6 stands as the year where writing becomes more tangible for the students and where they are more confident on their writing, as there is evidence that by year 6 they can do more than they do by year 4.

Keywords: writing development, clause types, clause interdependencies, lexical density, enhancing clauses

1. Introduction

In the ontogeny of writing, the first years – corresponding basically to years one to four – are seen as paramount for the future mastery of more mature registers than the ones dealt with in those years, which are necessarily connected to forms of language such as speech. As the primary meaning-making system available to children, oral language becomes the system that they rely on to learn the meaning-making system of writing. The process of learning to read and write is so complex and difficult for them that children end up expressing themselves in writing in simpler ways than they do in spoken language (Christie & Derewianka, 2009: 239; Halliday, 1993: 110). It is therefore the passage from primary four to primary five and six, which in certain educational systems, like the Portuguese, is in fact a passage from one cycle of learning to another cycle, which becomes the most important transitional passage in the whole system. It is in this period that written language starts to be shaped as a fully symbolic system on its own, as a meaning-making resource that is somehow in complementary distribution with that of spoken language. As Michael Halliday (2004: 7) has put it: “as writing systems evolve, and as they are mastered and put into practice by the growing child, they take a life of their own, reaching directly into the

---

1 I am grateful to Tom Grigg for reading and commenting on a draft of this text, which is the written version of a paper presented at the 37th International Systemic Functional Congress, held in Vancouver, Canada, at the University of British Columbia on 19-23 July 2010.
Following the above axioms, this paper sets out to examine two apparently contradictory findings reported in the most recent systemic functional linguistics (SFL) literature on writing development in basic school: one, that in years five and six students’ "texts develop a greater range of clause types and clause interdependencies" (Christie & Derewianka, 2009: 240); and two, that "Primary five and six (...) show little or no development in the children's writing when compared to Primary four" (Foley & Lee, 2004: 117).

For this purpose a description and analysis of the lexico-grammatical structures of 800 student's texts (400 for each school year) has been carried out. Written in Portuguese as L1, the texts were produced during the national examinations for each of the school years and were authored by students who had the highest marks. The analysis dealt mostly with clause types, clause interdependencies and circumstantialization (via Adjuncts in the clause and enhancing clauses in the clause complexes).

The paper is organized in four sections including this introduction. In the second section a description of the problem constituting the motivation for this particular research is provided along with a short review of the literature supporting both the research and the theoretical assumptions underlying it. In the third section, some research results are presented in order to prove the point taken in the paper. In the fourth and last section, some conclusions are systematized and presented.

2. The problem

In their characterization of the developmental trajectory in writing, as manifested by the data they analyzed, Christie & Derewianka (2009) refer to four phases of development. Although involving experimentation with texts, textualization principles and texts types, the initial phase, corresponding to the initial years of schooling, is mostly characterized by the children’s reliance on their knowledge of the oral language to learn the written language. The second phase, corresponding in some systems to the transition from primary to secondary school, and in others to the transition from the first to the third cycle of basic school, and recognized, independently of the system, as the transition from being taught by just one teacher to being taught by more than one, is characterized by children’s acquisition of more mature forms of writing, particularly those connected to more specialised genres and registers of discourse.

According to the authors, who also follow conclusions from Schleppegrell’s (2008) study on the language of schooling, as children learn to master the new information-packed clause structures of academic registers, their texts present a wider range of possible choices in terms of clause types and clause interdependencies. Identified as a phase where many students fall behind and where literacy performance seems in fact to deteriorate and becomes negatively correlated to

---

2 The original project of which this paper’s results are only a part also includes year nine texts produced under the same circumstances. That project aims at mapping writing development across basic schooling, with these three years as stages in that development.

3 There is variation across the different national educational systems about where primary school ends and secondary school begins. The Portuguese educational system consists of a total of twelve years that progress through four different cycles of study/teaching. The first three cycles correspond to primary school organized in years one to four, five and six, and seven to nine, respectively, and the last cycle corresponds to secondary school, organized in years ten to twelve. Phase 2 referred to by Christie & Derewianka (2009) corresponds to years four to seven, in the Australian system, which is matched in this study with years five and six of the Portuguese system, e.g., mid-primary school.
educational attainment, this is also the phase that was given more attention by the educational authorities in countries like Australia, the USA and the UK (Christie & Derewianka, 2009: 240-241). Despite this characterization, phase 2 is indeed construed by the authors as a phase of progress and development, particularly if looked at from the point of view of the ontogeny of writing; it is a phase in which children increase their potential in the use of the meaning-making system of writing and gain control over it.

As echoed above these are basically the same conclusions reached by Schleppegrell (2008: 78-79), for whom children, in the process of attaining more mature forms of writing, “begin to incorporate dependent clauses, vary their sentence structure, and expand their vocabulary”, as opposed to the sole use of coordination structures typical of their earlier years in writing. The author provides a comprehensive set of examples of this process in her review of the literature on writing development, particularly concerning grammatical structures and their control by the growing child. Examples included the one just referred to, but also an increase in nesting and embedding, in coordination of predicates and in the use of appositives and non-finite participles, to refer to just a few. Despite its comprehensiveness, the study fails to provide the reader with a clear picture of the different phases the growing child goes through in terms of writing development, since all the characteristics are reported as characteristics of writing development from children’s “early writing” to “more mature writing”, (that is from child writing to adult writing), with all the references to specific ages and grades scattered throughout the text which are not systematized.

In a study on the development of children’s writing in primary schools in Singapore, to see “how a child’s control of written language developed from their initial entry into primary school until the end of primary schooling”, Foley and Lee (2004: 97) reach some interesting conclusions which are not entirely concordant to those of Christie & Derewianka (2009) and Schleppegrell (2008). Particularly interesting is the fact that of all the characteristics observed by these authors in their data, only one of them can actually be matched to the grammatical aspects referred to in relation to the above quoted studies, e. g., the “increasing use of hypotactic and embedded clauses” in years five and six (Foley and Lee, 2004: 97). Overall, what is striking in their study is the observation that the data show little or no development from year four onwards. As they put it (idem: 117): “one very notable feature which stands out in this data is how little development there is from Primary four onwards. In general, having completed Primary four, the indications are that in Primary five and six all the features we have analysed show little or no development in the children’s writing when compared to Primary four.”

These same results were somehow echoed in the conclusions of a previous paper of mine on the same data now under analysis (Gouveia, forthcoming). As noted in that paper, year six shows some tendencies that do not correspond to what one should expect as possible realizations: fewer clause complexes and more simplexes, and fewer embedded clauses, which correlates with lower values for lexical density. It is worth mentioning, though, that we are matching these results with the assertion that years five and six show no progression in comparison with year four, but these same results do not match the statement by Foley and Lee, (idem) on the increasing use of hypotactic and embedded clauses in years five and six, referred to above.

The truth claims of the two positions just described seem somehow in opposition. One could rightly say that the different findings may be caused by the different languages involved, English and Portuguese, but that would not explain the differences between the results reported by Christie & Derewianka (2009) and Schleppegrell (2008), on one side, and the results reported by Foley and Lee (2004), on the other. How are we, then, to look at these differences and make...
them a plausible explanation for what happens between years one to four and years five to six when it comes to writing development?

3. The findings

For the purpose of this paper, the texts were analysed for their characteristics concerning clause type, clause interdependencies and circumstantialization, both via enhancing clauses in the clause complex and via Adjuncts in the clause.

3.1. Clause types and clause interdependencies

There is no doubt that in the data under analysis there is a difference between the use of clause simplexes in year four and in year six, slight as it may be (around 4%), that is against all odds. This is true for both ranked and embedded clauses: year six not only makes more use of ranked simplex clauses than year four, and inversely less use of ranked clause complexes, it also makes more use of embedded simplexes than year four does, and inversely less use of embedded clause complexes. For sure this clearly means less clause interdependencies per text, and eventually a correlated lower level of lexical density per text as well. These values are somehow homologous to the values concerning taxis, with year six showing not only more paratactic interdependencies than hypotactic ones but also higher and lower values respectively in both cases of taxis than year four. I think that the odd figures here are not the ones for year six, but they are the ones for year four. The difference may be explained by the wording used in the task requesting the text of year four, which somehow compelled the students to use hypotactic constructions. Notice that the task asked the students to put themselves in the role of an object of writing, under the general title “Se eu fosse --- por um dia” (If I were a --- for one day). This title led the vast majority of the students to also use this construction in the opening of their texts which meant an opening with an hypotactic construction, e.g., “If I were a computer for one day, I would...”.

Getting back to the problem, that is, year six showing more paratactic relations and less hypotactic relations than year four, I would say that such a difference means that whether or not from year four to year six students' "texts develop a greater range of clause types and clause interdependencies” (Christie & Derewianka, 2009: 240) remains to be seen.

Let us then look at the data for both years. From year four to year six, and restricting ourselves to the different types of expansion, what one notices is an increase in the number of cases of elaboration and enhancement and a decrease in the cases of extension. This means that children are in fact experimenting with meanings and expanding their resources from a grammar that is basically based on the addition of meanings, either by addition or variation, typical of extension, and using more possibilities like those associated with developing alternatives and clarifications to meanings previously expressed, typical of expansion, or those associated with setting up qualifying frames for those meanings, typical of enhancement. This use of elaboration

---

4 Apart from this difference, it must be added that year four values for extension, the type of logico-semantic relation that decreases from year four to year six, are 2.5% above the average for years four, six and nine altogether, and year six values for the same type are 3.5% below. The results for the types of logico-semantic relation that increase from year four to year six (enhancement and elaboration) are rather different: in the case of enhancement, they are both above the average – year four by 1.3% and year six by 2.5%; in the case of elaboration they are both below the average – year four by 3.8% and year six by 1.4% (thus showing that it is year nine that contributes more to the definition of the average, staying above it by almost 4%).
and enhancement by year six students can be seen clearly in the following examples, respectively:

A tempestade não parava, ou melhor, cada vez piorava mais.
O barco desprendeu-se e começou a andar, ele cada vez estava mais longe e eu não conseguia voltar para o buscar. (6A-0021)

The storm wouldn’t stop, or rather, it was even getting worse.
The boat got loose and started sailing away, it was further and further away and I could not go back and get it.

Tentei salvá-la enquanto os meus pais e o meu primo mais pequenino foram chamar o nadador salvador. O meu primo maior ficou comigo. (6A-0024)

I tried to save her while my parents and my younger cousin went to call the lifeguard. My older cousin stayed with me.

Year four students do not use elaboration at all with “ou melhor” (or rather), as in the example above by a year six student. All the six clear cases of paratactic elaboration with “ou melhor” documented in the corpus were written by sixth graders. In fact, the uses of elaboration in year four are somehow confined to constructions with “ou seja” (that is to say), almost never used by students in years six and nine, with “quer dizer” (I mean), practically never used by year six students and not used at all by year nine students, and with “por exemplo” (for instance), which is used only once by both year six and year nine students but used around 20 times by fourth graders. Examples of such use by fourth graders include, for instance, the following:

Podia-me acontecer variadíssimas coisas como por exemplo: ser trocada, perder-me, estragarem-me por gozo etc. (4A-0098)

Several things could happen to me like for instance: being switched off, getting lost, being damaged just for fun etc.

While this is happening, that is, the progression from the use of very delimited and concrete meanings to more abstract ones and the expansion of meanings in the text via elaboration and enhancement, some new uses are also being experimented with, showing in fact that the range of possible clause dependencies and logico-semantic relations is in fact becoming wider. It is interesting to notice, for instance, the use of “en quanto” (while) in temporal enhancement clauses by year six students, who use it almost three times more than year four students6, but who also use it, contrary to what happens with year four students, in adversative extension clauses as in the example below:

De facto estávamos perto e à nossa frente havia uma floresta, onde ele devia estar.
O filhote era branco e castanho enquanto que o Tobias era preto. (6A-0387)

In fact we were close and in front of us there was a forest, where he would be. The puppy was white and brown whereas Tobias was black.

From what has been said so far, it seems evident that when it comes to clause types and clause interdependencies year six students, more than year four students, are experimenting with language. With that in mind, one can actually say with Christie & Derewianka (2009: 240) that

---

5 For the sake of clarity spelling mistakes were corrected in all examples, since their presence would not serve any purpose in this paper and their correction has no negative impact either.

6 This usage is similar to that of year nine students, which apparently means that it is from mid-primary school on when it becomes expressive and regular in school writing.
year six students’ texts do in fact “develop a greater range of clause types and clause interdependencies” than found in year four students’ texts. Displaying a lower number of clause interdependencies per text, less embedded clause and eventually a correlated lower level of lexical density also per text, may well not be a case of regression or of showing little or no development. It may well be a case of playing and experimenting with language. That this may well be true becomes evident if one compares the following excerpt from a text by a year six student, which shows more simplexes (three) than clause complexes (two), to a text by a year 4 student, which shows opposite values (one simplex and three clause complexes):

Não sabíamos o que fazer. Estávamos muito desgostosos. Tentei salvá-la enquanto os meus pais e o meu primo mais pequenino foram chamar o nadador salvador. O meu primo maior ficou comigo. Ainda agarrei a patinha dela, mas estava escorregadia e escorregou-me das mãos. (6A-0024)

We did not know what to do. We were very sad. I tried to save her while my parents and my younger cousin went to call the lifeguard. My older cousin stayed with me. I managed to hold her paw, but it was slippery and it slipped out of my hands.

Sabem, eu tive um pouco de medo naquela altura, porque a rainha poderia querer mandar-me pelo esgoto abaixo, mas não. A rainha era muito simpática e levou-me para o banquete que ela ia ter naquela noite.

Como já tinham passado 24 horas a mágoa desfez-se e eu transformei-me outra vez numa menina. Foram as 24 horas mais excitantes da minha vida. (4A-0033)

You know, I was a little bit afraid at the time, because the queen might have wanted to throw me down the drain, but no. The queen was very nice and took me to the banquet she was having that evening.

Since 24 hours had passed the sorrow disappeared and I transformed myself into a girl again. These were the most exciting 24 hours of my life.

The first example, by a year six student, plays with rhythm by using both simplexes and clause complexes as the text progresses, thus showing more confidence in the way the information flows. The writer seems aware that the use of simplexes involves mastery and that a coherent organization of experience may make the use of conjunctions or other connecters unnecessary. In that sense it seems a more textualized text. The second example, by a year 4 student, shows more interdependencies, but follows a rhythmic pattern based on repetition and seems more concerned with getting the experience represented. In that sense it seems a more ideationalized text.

3.2. Circumstancialization

Labelled here as circumstancialization one sees a textual phenomenon of an ideational kind that may be expressed via Adjuncts in the clause, e. g., as circumstances in transitivity structures, and via enhancing clauses in clause complexes, e. g., as clauses in a logico-semantic relation of enhancement with another clause.

Besides showing that year six students make more use of enhancing clauses than year four students, our data also show that year six students present a wider range of choices of enhancing clauses. In fact, from year four to year six, the values for causal/conditional enhancing clauses decrease, whereas the values for temporal, spatial and manner enhancing clauses increase. This means that the causal-conditional clauses typical of year four, corresponding to more than three fifths of the total of enhancing clauses, give way in year six to further choices, particularly those associated with temporal, spatial and manner meanings. Of course, one has to bear in mind when
dealing with these numbers that the high percentage of enhancing clauses in year four is somehow correlated with the wording used in the task, which, as said before, somehow compelled the students to use hypotactic constructions, particularly enhancing clauses of the causal-conditional type. In fact, the vast majority of the students opened their texts with an enhancing hypotactic construction of the conditional type, such as “If I were a pencil for one day I would...”.

Looking at temporal enhancing clauses in the corpus, one notices two major differences between year four and year six texts. The first thing one notices is that ‘same time’ temporal clauses are used equally in both years; but year four texts tend to use mostly “quando” (when) clauses (“Quando acordei estava numa casa cheia de crianças”/ When I woke up I found myself in a room full of children – 4A-0127c), whereas year six students become less restricted in their choices, regularly using “entretanto” (meanwhile) clauses (used eight times as much), “mal” (as soon as) clauses (used five times as much), and “no momento em que” (the moment) clauses (not used at all by year four students). Here are some examples of these usages:

Há alguns anos atrás, estava eu em casa com a minha mãe, e entretanto o meu pai chegou. (6A-0089)
Some years ago I was at home with my mother, and meanwhile my father arrived.

Mal o Lucky ouviu isto começou a correr para o local de onde vinham os gritos, e eu fui atrás dele. (6A-0412)
As soon as Lucky heard this he started to run to the place the screams came from, and I ran behind.

Mikei foi atrás dele, e, ao chegar perto dele... Zás! ele apanhou-o, precisamente no momento em que o ladrão estava a entrar num prédio. (6A-0359)
Mikei went after him, and, when he was close to him... zap! he caught him right at the moment the thief was entering a building.

The second thing to be noticed is in the occurrence of temporal clauses pointing not to simultaneity but to either later or earlier time. The percentage of ‘earlier time’ temporal clauses in year six almost triples the percentage of the same type of clauses in year four. For instance, clauses with “antes de”, “antes que” or “mas antes” and “mas primeiro” (before, but before and but first) occur more often in year six than in year four texts, which again means that the construing of experience in year six texts is more resourceful than in year four:

Decidimos ajudá-lo, tirá-lo dali, mas primeiro tínhamos de pedir ajuda. (6A-0434)
We decided to help him, take him off there, but first we had to ask for help.

Resolvi ir embora antes que alguém me visse. (6A-XXX2)
I decided to go before someone saw me.

Mas antes de partir, fui buscar um copo à cozinha, e meti a tartaruga lá dentro. (6A-0337b)
But before leaving, I went to get a glass in the kitchen, and I put the turtle inside it.

Although only used by two year six students, these occurrences are worth mentioning here as examples of writing development considering that they do not occur at all in year four texts, but do occur in texts by ninth graders. This means that “no momento em que” (the moment) clauses are probably used mostly by more advanced students than year four students, and the occurrence of two examples in year six texts is meaningful.
Looking now at manner clauses and causal clauses, it is worth mentioning that in our corpus the use of manner clauses almost doubles from year four to year six, and among these it is particularly comparison clauses that are more visible. In year six comparison clauses are around fifty percent of all manner clauses, whereas in year four they correspond to just one fifth of the same clauses. For instance, picking up comparison clauses using “como se” (as if), like the one below, the result in terms of proportion of occurrences in the corpus, comparing year four to year six, is 1:4 (e.g., four times greater in year six):

Eu comecei a chorar e o Puppy veio ter comigo como se quisesse festas. (6A-0046)
I started to cry and Puppy approached me as if he wanted to be caressed.

As for causal enhancing clauses, the most striking characteristic found in the corpus is the extensive use of “porque” (because) clauses in year four, a tendency that becomes less present as one moves from year four to year six and then to year nine. As students move from year four to year six, “porque” (because) clauses tend to have a minor role in texts, opening up ways to “pois” (as) clauses, and other more sophisticated causal enhancing relations: for every year four “porque” (because) clause there are only 0.6 clauses of the same time in year six, whereas for every year four “pois” (as) clause there are 1.6 clauses of the same time in year six. Also there are some constructions that are possible to find in year six texts, like constructions using “visto que” (since) or “portanto” (therefore) which are not found at all in year four.

...de repente ouvimos algo que não era normal, visto que aquele local era muito silencioso... (6A-0010)
...suddenly we heard something that was not normal, since that place was quite silent...

"Ele é um pirilampo e brilha no escuro, portanto agora será mais fácil encontrá-lo"- pensei eu. (6A-0315)
"He is a firefly and it shines in the dark, therefore it will be easier to find him", I thought.

Let us now look at circumstancialization in the clause. Circumstancialization in the clause is construed mainly through transitivity circumstances, realized by adverbs and prepositional phrases. What one notices as one moves from year four students’ texts to those of year five is, for instance, the extraordinary amount of “–mente” adverbs (-ly adverbs) used by these older students when compared to year four students. The extraordinary increase in the use of these adverbs (2.3 times more uses in year six than in year four) is mostly motivated by the use of some quite expressive manner adverbs, like “euforicamente” (euphorically), “jocosamente” (jocosely), “sorrateiramente” (stealthily), “desvairadamente” (frantically) “vagarosamente” (leisurely). Of the five more frequently used adverbs in each year, corresponding to forty (40) cases in year four and sixty-seven (67) in year six, more than half (67 %) of those in year four texts are time adverbs (27 against 13 of manner), whereas in the case of year six the opposite happens: 58 % are manner adverbs (39 against 28 of time).

This difference in the use of these adverbs between year four and year six students can also be seen with other types of adverbs besides the ones ending in -mente (-ly). For instance the adverb “depressa” (quick(ly)) is used three times more in year six than in year four. The same happens with the construction “estar quase a” (be almost + verb). This same adverb “quase”, in
“quase como” (*almost like*) constructions, and the adverbial locution of certainty “com certeza” (*with certainty, certainly*) are only used by year six and year nine students.

Circumstances realized by prepositional phrases are mostly circumstances of time and place. In sequencing time, year four students tend to use more a temporal adjunct like “depois” (*then, later*), as in:

\[
\text{Depois eu comecei a brincar sozinho mas não consegui sair da cama porque era demasiada alta...} \quad (4A-0120b)
\]

*Then I started to play by myself, but I could not get out of the bed because it was too high...*

Year six students also use the same device to transmit the same value, but they also use it with some kind of modifier, like in “pouco depois”, “pocos minutos depois”, “uns dias depois”, “uma semana depois”, thus contributing to more fluidity in the narrative sequencing. The same uses by year four students are rather rare, and they tend to have a more definite temporal precision than those used by year six students (cf. “um dia depois”, “dez anos depois”/*one day later, ten years later*). Here are some examples, the first by a year four student, the other two by a year six student:

\[
\text{Dez anos depois a Rosita e o Francisco deixaram de jogar em mim...} \quad (4A-0141)
\]

*Ten years later Rosita and Francisco stopped playing in me.*

\[
\text{Poucos minutos depois eu encontrei um enorme buraco numa árvore velha de tronco grosso e rugoso.} \quad (6A-0131)
\]

*A few minutes later I found a huge hole in an old tree with a thick and rough trunk.*

\[
\text{Uns dias depois o tal policia veio ter comigo e agradecer imenso a ajuda.} \quad (6A-0167)
\]

*Some days later that policeman approached me and thanked me very much for my help.*

One can say that although already used by year four students, temporal Adjuncts become regular in terms of use in year six students’ texts thus acquiring more visibility\(^8\). At the same time they start to be more complex in terms of structure, like the examples with “depois” above and like the following two, one with two temporal references, the other one with an epithet:

\[
\text{Um dia numa tarde de Primavera, estava eu e a minha cadela, a Tica, a brincar no jardim.} \quad (6A-0092)
\]

*One day on a spring afternoon, I was with my puppy, Tica, playing in the garden.*

\[
\text{Numa bela tarde de sol, duas grandes amigas decidiram ir explorar a floresta.} \quad (6A-0316)
\]

*On a beautiful sunny afternoon, two great friends decided to explore the forest.*

\[^8\] These results have to be looked at with caution and must take into consideration the genres of the texts that the students were asked to produce. In 2007-2008 the writing tasks in the three national exams asked the students to write texts that fall under the general category of story. In the case of year 4, the task aimed at what seems to be a *recount* of a 24-hour fantastic experience; in the case of year 6, it aimed at a *narrative* of “an adventure, real or imaginary” with the student as the main character and narrator; in the case of year 9, it aimed at an *anecdote*, in which a particular, out of the ordinary situation in one’s experience is recalled or imagined. Year four texts elicited particular textual values due to the wording of the task, which used verbs in the conditional. As referred to before, students felt compelled to begin their texts with a clause complex formed by a condition informing a hypothetical situation (“If a were a computer, I would...”), which somehow constrained the remaining textual choices.
This complexity is not merely structural, though. In fact one might say that it denotes some complexity in the way texts and the writing of texts are perceived by students. For instance, the temporal Adjunct “depois”, already referred to, is used differently by year four and year six students in conjunction with post-modifiers. Interestingly enough only year six students use these post-modifiers with a textual function. As they do with other Adjuncts, year four students use these Adjuncts with a somewhat definite temporal precision, like “depois do almoço” (after lunch), “depois do toque” (after the bell), “depois do jantar” (after diner). Year six students, on the other hand, as well as year nine students, use them in a rather more abstract and general way, with the purpose of referring back to the text and contributing to the flow of narrative. Examples by year six students are “Depois do sucedido” (After what happened), “depois do susto do ano anterior” (after last year’s dismay); examples by year nine students are “depois do fatídico acidente” (after the fateful accident), “depois do choque inicial” (after the initial shock).

4. Conclusion

The results in this study, partial and non-exhaustive as they may be, show that while there seems to be little or no development from year four to year six when it comes to percentages of the use of clause types and clause interdependencies (lower values in lexical density, more simplex less complex structures, for instance), there is in fact some difference between both learning cycles. Our analysis and comparison of structures used in students’ texts of both cycles show that there is evidence that by year six students can do more than they do by year four and that around year six texts do in fact develop a greater range of clause types and clause interdependencies, as stressed by Christie & Derewianka (2009) and Schleppegrell (2008).

Displaying a lower number of clause interdependencies per text, less embedded clauses and eventually a correlated lower level of lexical density per text as well, may well not be a case of regression or of showing little or no development, as might be thought, following Foley and Lee (2004). It may well be a case of playing and experimenting with language. In fact, our data shows that year six stands as the year where writing becomes more tangible for the students and where they are more confident in their writing, which may lead them to more experimentation.

By mapping uses of manner enhancing clauses and manner circumstances in the texts of both cycles, we could see that the use of manner structures represent one major aspect in writing development from year four to year six. The same must be said about temporal structures. Even if the values point to similarities, it is the range of uses that makes all the difference. Sixth graders make use of more possible choices than fourth graders, showing that their meaning potential is more resourceful. This same characteristic may be seen by looking at causal clauses and how they are used by both students. As we saw year six students use more sophisticated causal enhancing relations in clause complexes than year four students, who are more prone to use the basic because clause.

Data also showed that year six students use certain complex structures that year four students are not yet fully using. In most cases the use of these structures is related to a textual organization motivation which is not yet fully present in year four students, and denotes that year six students have developed a sense of textuality now being experimented with and tested. This difference in matters of textualization leads us to conclude that year four students are still

---

9The importance of year six examples, few as they may be, derives from the fact that they are uses not present in year four but present in year nine, which makes them examples of writing development, as stressed in a previous footnote, concerning other examples.
struggling with ideational meaning, in the sense that they are at the end of their period of mastering the meaning-making system of writing and the construing of experience. Year six students, on the other hand, are more confident in using the meaning-making system of writing as a fully symbolic system, involving not only the construing of experience but also its symbolic organization in texts.

References