



Chilean students learn to think historically: Construction of historical causation through the use of evidence in writing



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 16 November 2013

Keywords:

Historical literacy
Historical writing
Historical explanation

ABSTRACT

This study characterizes Chilean secondary student strategies to produce written historical explanations from the use of evidence. This research uses a qualitative design that adopts discourse analysis to examine 57 essays by students between 12 and 17 years old. The essays addressed historical problems. With the help of experts in history and teaching history, nine essays were analyzed according to the categories of agency, construction of a causal chain, and perspective on the evidence. The results identified three ways that students build historical explanation: chronicle without a historical sense; narration without a historical sense; and narration with a historical sense. The authors conclude that in teaching and learning historical causation and the determination of historical problems, the relationship between the processes of reading and the analysis of evidence, as well as their organization and transfer into writing, must be considered.

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1. Introduction

The Chilean history curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2009a, 2009b, 2012) is focused mainly on the learning of facts and historical processes chronologically ordered. It hardly mentions the development of skills required for reading and writing historical texts. These skills are separated on the one hand into historical research skills (analysis of evidence) and, on the other hand, reading evidence written in a variety of history texts (descriptive, explanatory, etc.). Other Chilean curricular tools reiterate this distinction, such as the seven-level Progress Map of Learning History (Ministry of Education, 2009a). The fifth level indicates the student must demonstrate that he/she “is able to understand that different historical interpretations can select, in various ways, the factors that explain the historical processes.” Similarly, the seventh level indicates the student must be able to “develop original essays challenging interpretations and considering a variety of sources” (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 17). Despite this inclusion, it does not specify the manner and procedures to assess argumentative texts or the inclusion of evidence in historical texts. In addition, the standardized national assessment, System Quality Measurement in Education (SIMCE), for history and social science focuses on the measurement of subject matter concepts rather than the skills of historical inquiry and their relationship with reading and writing historical evidence. Therefore, neither the Progress Map of Learning History, nor the standardized assessment (SIMCE) explicitly link the skills required for the analysis of evidence with the role of reading and writing in these processes.

Additionally, there are no disaggregated student records of learning history, nor empirical evidence of the types of curriculum resources employed in history classes in Chile. Teachers primarily rely on the history textbook as their learning tool, and organize and implement its proposed activities in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2009c). The textbook

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holds, in this sense, a crucial role because of its influence on literacy and learning activities in the classroom. However, Chilean textbooks – officially approved and understood as a *historical genre* (Coffin, 2006) – do not introduce students to the specifics of historical discourse, such as constructing historical meaning from knowledge of perspectives about the past. As argued by Oteíza Silva (2006) and Oteíza Silva and Pinto (2011), school textbooks present historical facts based on restricting various voices. Linguistic devices such as the nominalization of certain facts, value judgments of approval and social sanction, existentialization of events, and symbolic construction of time legitimize and delegitimize certain aspects of the past. Thus, the discursive features adopted by the language used to teach history affect the development of literacy processes in the discipline, understood as reading, reasoning, and writing (Young & Leinhardt, 1998).

Students can develop the ability to differentiate among the multiplicity of voices, intentions, and purposes of authors in analyzed texts by reading the materials used in history classes, such as primary and secondary sources, audiovisual sources, and others (Oteíza Silva & Pinto, 2011; Paxton, 2002). Reading produces processes of reasoning, interpretation, and analysis. All of these skills are necessary to produce historical discourse that results in different historical genres in school, such as description, argumentation and explanation (Coffin, 2006).

Consequently, in Chile one can see a clear dissociation among the curricular purposes of history teaching, the assessment tools that measure student learning, and the curriculum resources used in the classroom. Additionally, there is little scholarship on the relationship between language use and the learning of history by children and youth. Specifically, there are unclear connections between teaching methods for reading and writing using historical evidence, and the evaluation methods employed in the classroom (Henríquez, 2011). In this context, it is important to examine discursive mediation and its implication in the process of evidence-based historical sense-making. In the construction of historical meaning, language has constitutive roles in the formulation of historical questions, in the selection and reading of sources, as well as in the actual writing. The characterization of this discursive mediation is relevant given the objectives of teaching and its role in learning history.

1.1. History literacy

Interest in the theoretical and practical development of disciplinary literacy (Moje et al., 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) has allowed the characterization of thinking, reading, and writing approaches in different disciplinary domains. In particular, an analysis of the different methods used by historians for reading source material permits us to identify how the evidence is evaluated and linked to give it historical significance.

The process of identifying the author's perspective and comparing and corroborating information with other documents (Paxton, 2002; Stahl & Shanahan, 2004; Wineburg, 1991a, 1991b) is articulated by using conceptual structures that connect the knowledge of historical events and processes with the rhetorical content of the discipline.

For Young and Leinhardt (1998), academic literacy integrates two dimensions of disciplinary knowledge: the content of the discipline, and the knowledge of rhetorical process of the discipline. Concepts of history, such as “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie,” provide schemes to organize the causal chain of a historical narrative (Paxton, 2002). In turn, the rhetorical resources structure this knowledge in a discursive way. Thus, the articulation of both dimensions is an organizational arrangement giving historical meaning to the story, accompanied by verbal resources as textual connectors that establish the hierarchy of causes. Through these rhetorical resources, we can identify the author's subjectivity or perspective and how it affects the changes and continuities of the past.

Reading and analyzing sources used by historians involve identifying the author's intent and corroborating the internal consistency of the documents (and their possible links with other evidence), in order to determine their epistemological nature (Leinhardt & Young, 1996). Thus, the historian is able to establish and connect diverse perspectives from the evidence of the past (Monte-Sano, 2011; Paxton, 2002; Wineburg, 1998; Young & Leinhardt, 1998). Consequently, reading the evidence is a heuristic process that operates during the interpretation of historical evidence and the contextualization of historical writing. In this regard, it is noteworthy that “History is a language-based discipline” (Achugar & Stainton, 2010, p. 145) not only because it uses language to make sense of the past, but also because it is built through language. The writing of history, for example, transforms the actions on objects using nominalizations and replaces the sequence of human time for a frozen time settings (Eggins, Wignell, & Martin, 1993).

In the school system, the development of academic language and the learning of history are deeply related; Martin (2011) argues that one of the crucial problems of historical education corresponds to the discursive mechanisms that mediate learning to read evidence of the past. These discursive characteristics are expressed in the oral interaction between the teacher and student, and in the manner the history is written. This becomes important because the discursive forms adopted represent a model for the construction of students' historical knowledge.

The characteristics of school history texts can be grouped into two different genres: the narrative and argumentative (Coffin, 2006). The main feature of the narrative genre is to relate specific events in a linear temporality. For this reason, this type of text lacks the interpretive apparatus or conceptual structures that organize, connect, and orient a set of facts; the time sequence is the axis that structures it. Autobiographical and biographical genres are within the narrative genre. In the teaching of history, the narrative genre is one of the most widely used, summarizing historical events and inserting them into a temporal sequence (Coffin, 2006).

The argumentative genre differs from the narrative because it incorporates causal relationships within the main time sequence. That is to say, instead of only connecting the actions temporally, one after the other, the actions acquire roles

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