

CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS IN VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND USE IN THE WRITTEN PRODUCTION¹

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ABSTRACT. *This paper examines children's characteristics in relation to their vocabulary acquisition process in the foreign language. The present study analyzes the vocabulary produced in written compositions by 79 young Spanish students in primary education. The main semantic fields used by them are identified and analyzed taking into account their characteristics. The field of leisure and games was found to be the most recurrent, followed by the fields of school, home and family. Their lexical errors are also analyzed, showing that misspellings, omissions, borrowings and substitutions are the most frequent. The results of both the semantic fields and the lexical errors produced by learners highlight the ending of the self-centred stage in which they are.*

KEY WORDS. Vocabulary, semantic field, lexical errors and young learners.

RESUMEN. *Este artículo examina las características de los niños en su proceso de adquisición de vocabulario en lengua extranjera. El presente estudio analiza el vocabulario producido en composiciones escritas por 79 sujetos españoles de educación primaria. Se han identificado y analizado los principales campos semánticos, teniendo en cuenta sus características. El campo semántico del tiempo libre y los juegos resultó ser el más recurrente, seguido de los campos de la escuela, el hogar y la familia. Se han analizado también los errores léxicos de los sujetos. Los errores ortográficos, las omisiones, los préstamos y las sustituciones fueron los más frecuentes. Los resultados tanto de los campos semánticos como de los errores léxicos producidos por nuestros estudiantes señalan el final del proceso de egocentrismo en el que se encuentran estos alumnos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. Vocabulario, campo semántico, errores léxicos y aprendices jóvenes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of vocabulary acquisition and teaching takes a special character when young learners are the recipients of the instruction. The particular cognitive stage of

children learning a foreign language influences their use and acquisition of vocabulary. Examination of the lexical errors produced by these young learners provides us with an insight into that vocabulary acquisition process and reveals what areas of the foreign language lexis do young learners have problems with when writing in English.

In the following, we will first describe the main learning characteristics of young foreign language learners and see how they apply to the acquisition of vocabulary. Second, a brief account of the role of lexical errors as evidence of lexical learning will follow. In the third place, we report an empirical study aimed to highlight the most frequent semantic fields used by Spanish young EFL learners and the most recurrent vocabulary errors in their written production.

2. TEACHING VOCABULARY TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Several studies (Broughton et al. 1980; Scout and Ytreberg 1990; Brumfit, Moon and Tongue 1991; Tough 1991; Brewster, Ellis and Girard 1992; Phillips 1993; Cameron 1994; García Arrezas et al. 1994; Halliwell 1994; Vale and Feunteun 1995; Williams 1998; Barreras Gómez 2004) have pointed out an array of children's features, which must be taken into account when teaching English as a foreign language. In this section we are going to review the most relevant factors in children foreign language acquisition.

There are many factors influencing children's maturity such as culture, environment, sex (Philips 1993: 5) and experiences. According to Piaget, children are situated in a *concrete operational stage* (Mounoud 2001: 62). This means that they can understand concrete aspects and topics rather than abstract ones (Williams and Burden 1999: 31). Consequently, they can easily understand the meaning of new words whose referents are concrete, such as *table*, *tree* and *dog*. In this way, it is also useful to introduce words whose meaning can be deduced with an action, body language, flashcards, photographs, drawings² and other objects. This happens because they can easily join the meaning to the thing or action it represents. Therefore, words whose meaning is abstract, such as *love*, *justice* or *hope*, have no concrete referents and this makes children's understanding of the word difficult.

Besides, Rondal (1999: 54) asserts that children learn words easier than grammar. In this sense, Philips (1993: 74) argues that "[T]his may be because words have tangible, immediate meanings whereas structures are less obviously useful -after all Pencil often obtains the same result as 'Can I have a pencil?'".

In addition to this, understanding grammar involves explanations given with abstract terms that students do not understand. In fact, from the point of view acquired by his experience as a teacher, López Rodríguez (2003: 27) criticizes the importance given to grammar in primary education, as it has to do with abstractions. He argues that it is often forgotten that in primary education understanding is mainly semantic. In the same line, Bloor (1991: 129) contends that children learn a foreign language better in situations in which attention is focused on meaning rather than on language itself. So children's learning of a language is better in real context situations rather than in

situations that require an intellectual effort. Noteworthy is also his comment that “unfamiliar vocabulary is more easily understood when the objects under discussion are present in the surroundings” (Bloor 1991: 129).

This author thinks that the actual presence of objects makes children deduce the new meanings more easily. Therefore, vocabulary related to the student's environment is important. Its referent is not abstract but concrete. Moreover, it is useful because children can understand the new vocabulary without any translations into their mother tongue. In this sense, Halliwell (1994: 3) stands out that primary education children are good at interpreting the general meaning. Teachers can make use of voice intonation or body language to facilitate the process of meaning understanding.

In addition to this, it is important to remember the relevance given to personal experiences by children of this age. This justifies the use of topics they like in order to motivate them. Consequently, depending on those topics students will study different semantic fields. On the other hand, this has to do with the use of meaningful learning, as the teacher uses their previous learning and experiences so as to widen them and so as to introduce new information. Zanón (1992: 100-101) thinks that the use of meaningful learning in the teaching of English is necessary. According to him, if meaningful learning is used, once the activity is over, the new knowledge will be stored in long-term memory.

In the case of English this new knowledge is joined to the real use of language, as that was the way it was known the first time. Therefore, it is used as an instrument of communication. Accordingly, students learn to communicate by communicating. Frequently, this communication is learned in the context provided by role play games. Students are young children who are used to playing and to being involved in different games in which they need to speak in Spanish for their communication. The teacher will provide them with dramatizations and games requiring children to speak English to participate. Children will feel the necessity of speaking in English in order to play with their classmates and to be understood by them. This is the way the teacher helps the students in their process of learning, especially in lexical learning. By using vocabulary in a meaningful way children will acquire it easier than when learning by heart a list of items of vocabulary in English and their translation into Spanish. In the second case, there would be many students who would not store it in long-term memory.

In relation to the social aspect, the teacher knows that most children like forming groups and taking part in team activities. This gives them the opportunity of speaking with each other in English. Moreover, children of this age start overcoming their self-centred stage. They are interested about others and in relating themselves to other classmates. This helps the teacher to introduce students to a new culture.

In addition to this, children's overcoming of their self-centred stage helps the teacher to use participative games, which reinforce vocabulary. These ludic activities improve the environment in the class. In this sense, we can stand out Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. He sees the affective filter as being the emotional disposition of an individual which acts upon the learning processes. A high affective filter causes the learner to be a relatively inefficient learner. This is likely to result from anxieties,

disturbances or inhibitions. A low affective filter, which may result from feelings of relaxation, well-being or success, maximises learning efficiency (Ellis 1985: 263). In this good atmosphere the affective filter is down and the acquisition of the new language is easier. In addition to this, all learners are involved and their work is valued, which makes them feel comfortable. In this sense, Broughton et al. (1980: 170) assert that no child should feel pressed to learn. Moreover, children will learn more if they have a positive attitude towards what they are doing and if they want to do it (Williams 1991: 204). According to Melanie Williams, in this situation:

[A]ll learners are valued as individuals; challenges and risks are supported; topics are relevant and interesting; activities are meaningful and purposeful; praise is given where and when it is due; and discipline is firm, consistent and fair. As well as having a positive effect on the learning environment in the classroom, this approach will also encourage learners to be more tolerant of each other and others they encounter outside the classroom. (Williams 1998: 7)

Therefore, the student builds his self-esteem and he is positively predisposed to learn English.

In general terms, it is admitted that most children are uninhibited. They do not behave like shy teenagers do. The young student can learn fluent and natural English without strain, embarrassment or, even effort. Young children do not usually get embarrassed. They like getting involved. They are curious. They behave in a very extroverted way. This feature helps them learn more rapidly and more successfully; it follows that it is easier for them to start speaking in English. Lacking the inhibitions of their teenage years, they have more opportunities to practice their English, to learn from their mistakes and to obtain more input. These young students like role-playing and dramatizations, even when performing them in English, in front of the rest of their classmates.

In addition to this and according to Broughton et al. (1980: 169), there are some other important characteristics. Most young children like repetition and imitation. They enjoy repetitive kinds of language activities. They love to imitate. Repetition gives them a sense of achievement and assurance. This happens because children have to repeat the same thing all the time, but with slight differences. For example, each couple of students or group of students perform their dramatizations, repeating exactly the same words. However, as every performance is carried out by different students each of them adds something new to the dramatization such as a gesture, an intonation and so on. Most of the students in the class take part in it and everybody enjoys it.

These authors also claim that young children are physically very active. They like playing, running, just moving. There are many activities related to this natural characteristic which the teacher can take advantage of. For instance, action songs give them the opportunity of moving their bodies while singing. Moreover, songs are associated with relaxation and fun. It is a good device to stimulate the students and to improve the atmosphere of the class. On the other hand, they have to concentrate for a

while as many songs involve repetition, listening to the rhythm and a good memory in order to sing them. In addition to using physical activity, the teacher can also use young children's love of bright colours. Colouring and drawing activities can, therefore, be used in order to learn, for example, some vocabulary related to the colours or the objects they are drawing.

These are the most important factors in children foreign language acquisition. Especial attention has been paid to the acquisition of vocabulary, as that is the objective of our study. Moreover, these characteristics are relevant because they will shed light on understanding the vocabulary used by our young participants in their writings.

3. LEXICAL ERRORS AS EVIDENCE OF THE PROCESS OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Lexical errors serve as insight into the process of vocabulary acquisition, since they provide information about the aspects of lexis that are most problematic for learners, and in turn about the aspects they already master. By identifying, describing and classifying lexical errors we may learn much about what type of lexical items the learner knows or does not know, what is the source of the problem, or how to tackle that problem (cf. Corder 1967; Warren 1982; Ellis 1985)³. In the same line, Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001: 28) assert that "the types of errors and modifications that children make when imitating speech provide us with vital insight into the child's level of linguistic knowledge. If the teacher knows the kind of mistakes his students make he is in a much better position to prevent his students from making those mistakes again".

Lexical errors as observable interlanguage⁴ phenomena are an important source of information about L2 vocabulary acquisition. They are landmarks in the process of vocabulary acquisition and as such they reveal the main characteristics of that process pinpointing how it develops and highlighting the learning features of the learners involved (Celaya and Torras 2001; Naves et al. 2005). Lexical errors serve as a reliable instrument to investigate the organisation of the mental lexicon in L2 and to find out more about vocabulary development. They show how vocabulary knowledge develops, what stages it goes through and what happens in the mind of the learner when producing vocabulary (mental processes underlying lexical competence) (Ellis 1994).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the characteristics of young Spanish EFL learners as disclosed by their vocabulary use and lexical error production in writing. Our goal is to more completely understand the process of vocabulary acquisition by children, and enabling, thus, an improvement in vocabulary instruction to learners of short age. Therefore, in an examination of the vocabulary produced by ten year old learners of English in the Spanish school context, we asked the following research questions:

- 1) What are the main semantic fields identified in the written production of Spanish young learners?

- 2) How do these relate to the main characteristics of children of this young age?
- 3) Which are the main types of vocabulary errors?

4. OUR STUDY

A total of 79 learners from three different intact classes of a primary school in Logroño participated in the study⁵. Of these a total of 49 were male learners, and the other 30 participants were female learners. Participants were between nine and ten years of age and attended fourth grade of primary education in Spain. Their command of English is elementary. All of them started learning English in nursery school. By the time of data collection they had received a total of 419 hours of instruction. The English teaching methodology used in schools in Logroño is the communicative approach with a especial emphasis on the oral skills.

The data collection instrument used in the present study was a written composition. Subjects had thirty minutes to complete the composition task. Participants had to write a letter to an English host family. We selected this topic because, according to the literature, children at this age are starting to develop an interest in others and in other cultures. They start asking themselves about the English culture and are curious about other people and other culture. We believe that writing a letter to an English family living in Oxford, who will host them, will give subjects the opportunity of writing about what they want to speak about. In other words, subjects have the knowledge and the motivation to write the letter.

Once compositions were collected, they were typed into computer readable form and were scrutinized for lexical errors. Lexical errors were identified and listed. Four main categories of vocabulary errors are identified: misspelling, omissions, substitutions and borrowing⁶.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present section we will take two main orientations. First, we will give account of the most prominent semantic fields used by the participants in our study, taking into account their characteristics. Then we will study the most frequent lexical errors in order to examine their linguistic knowledge in English.

5.1. *Semantic fields*

In general terms, we can assert that children acquire first the general semantic characteristics of words (Galeote 2002: 167). That is why the semantic fields distinguished for this study are general.

The most recurrent semantic field is that related to leisure, games, hobbies and free time. Learners tend to explain what they like doing and devote most of the letter to write

about their hobbies. That is the reason why this semantic field is the most popular. There is a wide variety of words included in this semantic field. The majority has to do with playing sports, mainly football and basketball, but also riding a bike, swimming and running. This is not at all surprising because children at this age are very physically active so most of them enjoy themselves playing and moving around. However, they also mention other kind of activities not related to movement such as playing musical instruments for example violin or piano, watching TV, playing computer games, reading, playing with toys, going to the cinema with friends, drawing and painting.

Subjects also use many items of vocabulary related to the semantic field of school. The words widely used by them are: "school", "pencil case", "pencil", "books", "table", "chair", "desks", "teacher", "friends", "blackboard", "door". One can appreciate the relevance of the classroom language in their vocabulary. Galeote (2002: 178) stands out the influence of the environmental linguistic input in the process of acquisition of a language. This has to do with the fact that our students learn English in the formal context of the classroom. They must be very familiarized with words related to the classroom and the formal instruction as that is the place where they learn English.

The use of these classroom words also shows the importance they give to the world outside their family. This is especially true when they even write friends' names down as one can observe the importance they give to their social environment. They like forming groups. Also they start being interested about the others and in relating themselves to other classmates and friends. This has to do with the fact that at their age these students start appreciating other points of view (Brumfit, Moon and Tongue 1995: 185). And the group of friends is important.

Another paramount semantic field is that related to their homes. They describe the different rooms e.g. "bathroom", "bedroom", "living room", "kitchen", "toilet", but they concentrate on their bedrooms. Here they describe the pieces of furniture: "bed", "bookshelf", "table", "chair", "carpet", "computer", "pictures", "lamp", "desk". Apart from their bedroom, other pieces of furniture within the living room such as the television and the sofa are also important for them. To our surprise, many participants use the word "wardrobe". We think this word is quite difficult to learn, therefore, we believe that they have learned it in the English class, as there are other easier words to know such as "closet".

The fact that children write so much about their homes and in particular about their bedrooms serves again as a support of the idea that children at this age are still in their egocentric stage although in its last phases.

Referring to the semantic field of the family, the students use all the family terms, although the most reiterative ones are those related to the basic family, that is to say, "father", "mother", "brother" and "sister". It is also important to mention the relevance of their grandparents: "grandfather" and "grandmother". We believe that this reflects the tradition faithful social structure of La Rioja which has its base on the agricultural tradition where the "big" family is very important.

Other less frequently recurred semantic fields have to do with the city, animals, food and numbers. Regarding the semantic field of the city, students make use of a wide variety of words related to that topic. However, they reiteratively use: “park”, “supermarket”, “school”, “city” and “car”. They are words related to their everyday life. Other words that appear within this field are those related to city buildings (“church”, “cinema” and “shop”) and means of transport (“lorry”, “car” and “train”).

Students do not use much vocabulary related to the semantic field of animals. They mainly write about “dogs” and “cats”. We believe that they are so popular as they are the typical children’s pets. Moreover, these animals are easily found in cities and villages.

Participants do not always explain much about the food they like⁷. However, one can appreciate that “spaghetti”, together with “fruit” and “hamburgers” in a second place, are the most popular kind of food among them. Children again write about what they like. This fact reveals that they are still in their self-centered stage.

Talking about the semantic field of numbers, all of the students make use of it. “One”, “two” and “nine” are the most important. That is because “one” and “two” are used in the descriptions of their homes. They are necessary to explain how many bathrooms, bedrooms or living rooms are. Moreover, they use number “nine” in order to say how old they are.

In fact, there is another semantic field related to the participants themselves in which we include everything related to them. That is the case of their birthdays and the words “old”, “name” and “years”.

Another semantic field whose use is not very frequent is that related to the semantic field of the weekdays and months. There is an uneven use of these words, although the most important ones are “summer”, “Sundays” and “Saturdays”. We have to comment that these are related to vacations and free time and, consequently, to a period of time in which students can do those activities they like most.

There are some other semantic fields, which are not prominently used by the participants. Few children explain anything about their clothes, as that is not basic for the topic of this essay. Students know the basic colours and use them to talk about their favourite colours, the clothes they are wearing or to describe their hair and eyes. Participants also use other adjectives, such as “small”, “big”, “beautiful” or “favourite”. All of them are used in their descriptions.

Another semantic field used by some of the participants is that related to greeting and farewell. They use very familiar kind of vocabulary such as “hello”, “goodbye” and “bye bye”. We believe they have not been explained the formal or the familiar way of introducing oneself, for example. Consequently, they use the vocabulary they know.

Apart from the use of these semantic fields, we also want to comment upon their use of the pronouns and verbs as they are mainly used but they do not clearly belong to a concrete semantic field.

Participants use personal pronouns, although the most important one is “I”, since they are going to write a personal letter. They also use possessives to explain who the owner is. In general, the students use all of them, but “my” is mostly used as they are

writing a personal letter. According to Asher (1994: 1929), it is not difficult for children to acquire the personal pronouns and to understand them, depending upon who the speaker is at different moments. The first and the second person pronouns are learned very early. A proof of this is the recurrent use of "your" to substitute "her" or "his" and even "my". After that, the third person "it" is quite used and the rest of the personal pronouns (he, she, his, her, we, our, etc.) are acquired later.

As we have previously commented, participants use verbs related to different semantic fields. We can stand out the reiterative use of the verbs "to have", "to have got" or "to be" as they are basic for descriptions. Consequently, students use them to show where they live, to describe their families and so on. There are other verbs also important in their writings such as "live", "like", "love," "can", and "go". They have to do with the description of their homes and with the descriptions of things they like doing. Again these verbs are related to their self-centered stage.

In addition to this, Galeote (2002: 172) points out the difference of using nouns and verbs, "mientras que los nombres especifican objetos, los cuales estarían restringidos por la naturaleza del mundo físico, los verbos especificarían las relaciones entre esos elementos siendo más dependientes de conceptos abstractos (causa, posesión, etc.), lo que, a su vez, se reflejaría en diferentes estructuras". Consequently, this author remarks the difficulty of using verbs as they suppose a much more abstract level than the use of names. In fact, children start learning vocabulary related to the objects or people related to their everyday life and then they start learning verbs to explain what they can do with the objects, whose names they already know. So they can read a book, throw a ball, etc. Here we appreciate their use of verbs to explain what they like doing. The more frequent use of nouns than of verbs, which are often omitted, attests the previous contention. "I ... from Logroño" and "I ... years old nine" (of which more below). We have to take into account that it is easier for children to understand the concrete aspects of objects (nouns) rather than actions (verbs), because they belong to a higher level of abstraction.

In general terms, we can assert that our subjects use vocabulary related to their familiar environment, vocabulary related to concrete objects, to physical activities and to topics they like. These results are in line with previous research of children language development in the first and second language.

Scarcely have our participants made use of vocabulary related to abstract concepts. Furthermore, they are not very interested in those topics. The vocabulary used is to name objects they generally use at home, in the school. This illustrates the concrete operational stage distinguished by Piaget (1966) where children do not still have access to abstract concepts or aspects of reality.

In addition to this, the vocabulary they use is related to topics they like. This reflects the treatment these topics receive in their English lessons as teachers use these semantic fields to motivate their students.

Participants frequently write down the names of their friends and classmates. This has to do with the fact that their group of friends starts being more important for them. Children at the age of our subjects are in the first phases of opening themselves to others.

Not only are they family members but also members of other groups: classmates and friends. According to Philips (1993: 6), “socially, children need to develop a series of characteristics to enable them to fit into the society they live in, to become aware of themselves, in relation to others, to share and cooperate”. However, they are also still in their self-centered stage. Everything is seen from their point of view, as has been commented above.

By the vocabulary participants use one can appreciate that at this stage children are very physically active. This is one of the salient features of students in Primary Education (Broughton et al 1980: 169). Still other characteristic of children that is reflected in our data is their pleasure for colours: they mention a wide variety of colours.

We have spoken about the vocabulary used in terms of the students’ characteristics. We have highlighted the main semantic fields learners use, and now we are concerned with the examination of the vocabulary errors learners commit when using these words in composition. Especial attention will be paid to the issue of how these errors are typical of young beginner learners.

5.2. *Lexical errors*

We will identify, describe and classify the lexical errors made by our participants as they reflect the process of their acquisition of English and their vocabulary use in the fourth grade of Primary Education in Spain. We have observed four main categories of lexical inconsistencies. These are misspellings, omissions, borrowings and substitutions. This taxonomy does not intend to be exhaustive; it is just a description of the tendencies observed in the inconsistencies in vocabulary use. This is an exploratory study with its main focus on the relationship between lexical errors and semantic fields and how the former are reflected in the latter. For this reason we have decided not to include numerical counts of the lexical errors found.

A misspelling happens when the student does not write the word correctly. The lack of correspondence between the written form and the pronunciation of the word is often responsible for this type of error^s. Moreover, orthographic conventions in English are extraneous and very difficult for Spanish students. For example, double consonants, diphthongs, consonant clusters, not present in Spanish, such as in *intelligent*, *little*, *small*, *beautiful*, *fourteen*, *school* or *watch*.

Our participants have made some of the following misspellings: *swiming*-pool for *swimming*-pool, *fottball* for *football*, *hawers* for *hours*, *biutiful* for *beautiful*, *chiken* for *chicken*, *scool* for *school*. Learners tend to write words the same way they are pronounced, i.e. the spelling of the words reflects their pronunciation, or the way the learner pronounces it. This type of error affects equally nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs belonging to the various semantic fields. It is typical of beginner learners and learners in the early stages of English learning, be it as an L2 or as the mother tongue (cf. Celaya and Torras 2001). Young English natives usually produce misspellings by reflecting pronunciation in written language (cf. Cameron 2001: 138). This result also

supports Serra et al. (2000: 242) when they claim that “los niños entienden palabras y expresiones antes de poderlas producir, pero también a veces producen palabras que no conocen o no han segmentado adecuadamente”.

The second type of errors is that of omissions. Students do not write the word they have to write. This affects mainly the verbs “to be” and “to have” as they are the most frequently omitted ones in their texts. The following are examples of this phenomenon:

- “My name is Maite. I * nine years old”
- “How old * Peter? How old * Hellen?”
- “I * from Medrano”
- “A big house * two bathroom, one kitchen, one livingrrom, one hall, four bed-rooms”.

Omissions also affect the use of pronouns in the sentences. Participants do not always write them down. For example,

- “I have got a hamster * is grey white and brown”
- “* like read tebeos, comic paint watch the tv simpsons etc”
- “my father’s car is white, * is a Audi”

This type of omission is not surprising since in Spanish subject pronouns are not compulsory. This is a typical phenomenon of the so-called pro-drop languages⁹ such as Spanish.

This result is in line with James’ (1998: 106-107) claim that in the early stages of learning omission usually affects function words rather than content words. In the examples we have presented the verb “to be” can be considered delexicalized and pronouns are generally considered functional words. Similarly the condition of the verb “to have” is blurred.

According to Richards et al. (1985: 30), a borrowing is “a word or phrase which has been taken from one language and used in another language. For example, English has taken *coup d’etat* (the sudden seizure of government power) from French, *al fresco* (in the open air) from Italian and *moccasin* (a type of shoe) from an American Indian language”. We understand borrowing in our case as the inclusion of a Spanish word in the English sentence without any attempt at adapting it to the orthographic norms of English (see also Celaya and Torras 2001 and Naves et al. 2005 for similar considerations of borrowing). We believe this happens when learners do not know the word in English and, therefore, they write it in Spanish. Mostly names are affected by this phenomenon. This is the case in the following examples:

- “In my *ciudad* there is a zebra crossing, is a taxi, a bus, a car, a lorry, a traffic lights”
- “my *mejor amigo* is Borja”
- “my granny is *coja* and my grand father haven’t got *ombligo*”

Apart from borrowing the word directly from their mother tongue, learners also adapt some Spanish words so that they sound or look English. The following examples

illustrate this: “My *coleg* is big” (*colegio* is the Spanish word for school), “*matemats*” (*matemáticas* is the Spanish word for Mathematics), *pollit* (*pollito* is the Spanish word for chick). We understand that these adaptations imply a better knowledge of the English language. At least they take the risk of playing with words. In this sense, this confirms previous studies by Dewaele (1998) and Naves et al. (2005) where lexical inventions inspired in the mother tongue decreased as proficiency in the foreign language increased.

The role of the mother tongue is very important when writing in the foreign language, especially with beginner and young learners. Beginner learners lack the vocabulary to say all what they want to say, therefore, in their communication process, i.e. when writing and speaking (that is, the productive skills), they resort to compensatory strategies that allow for communication to proceed. One of the most recurrent strategies is recourse to the mother tongue, either by borrowing words directly from the L1, or by adapting L1 words to L2 conventions (Giovannina et al. 1999: 77; Celaya and Torras 2001; Naves et al. 2005). The use of the mother tongue as a compensatory strategy decreases as learners get more proficient (Celaya and Torras 2001; Naves et al. 2005). The case of young learners is especially clear, since they want to communicate at all costs, and the “what” prevails over the “how”. The foreign language is a tool in order to communicate. They do not focus on the language itself. Children want to fulfill their communicative needs and accomplish the task proposed and they use the L1 to do this. This is considered one of the most prominent compensatory communication strategies (Celaya 1992; James 1998; Ecke 2001). This is possible because the learners and the teacher and researcher share the same L1 (Celaya and Torras 2001). Moreover, they will not understand abstract aspects of a grammar explanation, such as subject, direct objects or auxiliary verb. They are still in Piaget’s concrete operational stage. Consequently, they use English to communicate, for example, to play a game, to do an activity or to understand a story.

Young learners seem to draw on their L1 to spell foreign words, since, as Celaya and Torras (2001) explain, the burden of learning both the meaning and the form of the target words is too heavy for them to learn words completely, therefore target words are acquired only partially. Borrowing from the native language while producing in the target language is most common in younger learners and learners at early stages of target language acquisition (Celaya and Torras 2001; Gabryś-Barker 2006).

Older learners, i.e. adolescents and adults, adopt a different strategy. As learners get older, they resort to the native language in different ways e.g. by adapting the L1 words to the target language rules and then by directly translating from the L1 into the target language (Celaya and Torras 2001). Naves et al. (2005) report that as learners progress in school grade their use of borrowings and lexical inventions decreases, nevertheless, the difference is significant only for borrowings. The ability to create new words in the target language seems to increase with age (Celaya and Torras 2001; Lessard and Levison 2001). Although there are many different types of lexical inventions (see Dewaele 1998), the most frequent among those that draw from L1 are coinages or adaptations of L1 words to the orthographic or phonetic conventions of the target language, and calques or literal

translations. This has very much to do with more proficient learners recurring to transfer of meaning, rather than of form (Ringbom 2001; Gabryś-Barker 2006). The use of L1 lexical items while producing in the target language can be traced back to different sources. Sometimes lack of vocabulary in the L2 causes the learner to use L1 words, instead. In these cases, the learner falls on the native language without any previous notice, be it either conscious or unconsciously (Dewaele 1998; Celaya and Torras 2001; Naves et al. 2005). Some other times, learners use their mother tongue to ask for information about lexical items in the target language. In such cases researchers talk of the pragmatic function of the L1 (Williams and Hammarberg 1998).

A substitution means that a word is used instead of another. For instance, “my” is used instead of “me” and “I” in examples such as “my like”, “my don’t like the horse”, “My’s family is mother, brother, and my”.

In our data pronouns are mistaken, especially, the third person pronouns. Here are some examples of this phenomenon.

- “I have got nine friends. *Your* (your for their) names are: Julia, Miriam, Virginia, Alejandra, irene, Merry, laure F., Laura V and Ana f”.
- “My favorite friend is Virinia, she is beautiful and *your* (your for her) hair is yellow”
- “I have got a one (tortuga) is big *your* (your for its) name is: Verta”
- “I have got a teacher *your* (your for his) name is Angel”

Still other types of substitutions involve nouns and verbs. In these cases a wrong selection of the lexical item takes place and the learner uses a word formally similar to the target word, as can be seen in the following example: “I life (life for live) in Logroño (Rioja)”. In this sense Galeote (2002: 186) contends that in the early stages of language production children use an item of vocabulary they know for others they do not know but which belong to the same word class or word family.

6. CONCLUSION

It is generally acknowledged that vocabulary is an important aspect of the learning of a foreign language. For example, Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001: 67) asserts, “a child’s vocabulary level can also enhance or hamper her understanding of the world”. Also McCarthy (1990: viii) writes, “no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way”. The first author speaks about a child in the natural context of his mother tongue. The second one speaks of the learner in the formal context of the classroom. Both of them emphasize the relevance of vocabulary. In fact, knowing vocabulary helps the learner to communicate in the target language, at least at a basic level.

The goal of this study is to shed light on the process of acquisition of vocabulary when learning English. According to Channell (1988: 83), “there are now theories of L2

vocabulary acquisition, a wide (and growing) range of teaching techniques available, and a greatly increased awareness on the part of most teachers (and learners) of the importance of vocabulary development. At the same time, understanding of the psychological aspects of L2 vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary use is still rather limited". We believe that this study helps to extend that limit.

The description of the main characteristics of young learners helps us to understand them better. Its knowledge can help the teacher to motivate them in class. For our study these features shed light on the lexical fields the young students can make use of. Words related to free time, school and family are the most reiterated ones in their written productions. The first semantic field has to do with activities, which involve their movement, as they are physically active. The second one shows their social world (outside their homes) which starts being important at their age. Finally, the last one shows the relevance given to their family, especially to their grandparent's role.

In general, one can assert that all the semantic fields they use in their compositions have to do with the characteristics of these young participants already commented above.

In addition to this, their main types of lexical errors have been described. This fact is important as these errors reveal the participants' level of linguistic knowledge. They are misspellings, omissions, borrowings and substitutions. Identifying them helps the teacher of English to prevent the students of this age from making them. In general terms, the participants of this study make these errors reiteratively. Once these errors are described and identified, the teacher can make the students work on activities in order to reinforce the correct forms.

As we have observed, the influence of the mother tongue is recurrent and for children saying something is more important than how to say it. From the findings of the present study we can conclude that teachers should encourage learners to use compensatory strategies to balance for lack of vocabulary. Furthermore, explicit teaching of vocabulary and spelling conventions is also called for. Practicing low frequent words can have important consequences in the learners' use of vocabulary in compositions. More frequent words are more easily learned and used, because learners need them to express their ideas since their outmost goal is to communicate rather than to write error free compositions. Future research should concentrate on exploring the progress of learners (older and more proficient learners) in their vocabulary use as the semantic fields and vocabulary errors are concerned.

NOTES

1. This investigation is part of the research project "El desarrollo de la competencia léxica en la adquisición del inglés en educación primaria" funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (Grant nº BFF2003-04009-C02-02) and by the University of La Rioja (Grant API-02/31). The first author enjoys a scholarship FPI 2004 from the *Comunidad Autónoma de La Rioja*.
2. In addition to this, as Edge asserts (1994: 128), if children use several senses to deduce the meaning of the new word they will remember it easier. Consequently, apart from listening to the new word they will have

- to use their sight to understand the new meaning. The teacher can also use other objects so children will have to taste, to smell or to touch, for example, a piece of apple or a flower.
3. There is much literature on this topic written, for example, by James (1998), Celaya and Torras (2001), Cenoz, Hufeisen and Jessner (2001), Dewaele (1998 and 2001) and Naves, Torras and Celaya (2005).
 4. According to Richards et al. (1985: 145), it is "the type of language produced by second- and foreign-language learners who are in the process of learning a language".
 5. We thank the headship and English teachers of the school for their collaboration.
 6. These categories of lexical errors were selected basing on the observations of the data that revealed these as the most frequent types of lexical errors committed by our participants in our study. It is an eclectic kind of taxonomy. These categories appear in James (1998).
 7. Jimenez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2006) in a paper specifically devoted to the food words produced by the same subjects of the present study in their 5th grade found that a 53.15 % of the subjects refer to food in their compositions. Furthermore, their results show that spaghetti and fruit are among the most frequent food words. We refer the reader to this paper for further details.
 8. Baugh (1974) explains some characteristics of the English language. The author gives a brief history of the English language, explaining which features have in common with Teutonic and Latin languages. He also explains which features make English both easy and difficult to learn. For example, the author comments upon the fact that English is written in one way and it is pronounced in a different one. Consequently, this characteristic makes the learning of English more difficult.
 9. According to Richards et al. (1985: 291-292), a pro-drop parameter is "a parameter which determines whether the subject in declarative sentences may be deleted. [...] Languages such as Italian and Arabic can have subject-less declarative sentences [...] and are referred to as pro-drop languages. [...] Researchers in second language acquisition have investigated what happens if a parameter in the speaker's native language is different from that of their target language, making it necessary to 'reset' the parameter." As a consequence in the acquisition of English (a non-pro-drop language) by speakers of pro-drop languages such as Spanish and Italian this would have to reset the parameter.

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