

# VOCABULARY GENDER PROFILES IN EFL E-MAILS<sup>1</sup>

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**Resumen:** El objetivo principal de este artículo es trazar el perfil de vocabulario utilizado por quince aprendices de inglés –siete chicas y ocho chicos– españoles de educación secundaria con dificultades de aprendizaje para describir a chicos/as de su misma edad y fiestas tradicionales del Reino Unido a partir de la información obtenida en un intercambio de e-mails con hablantes nativos de su misma edad basado en el e-mail tándem. Teniendo en cuenta estos textos, se pretende medir: 1) el número de tipos y ocurrencias utilizadas por los chicos y las chicas; 2) el tipo de palabras utilizadas por ambos sexos, y 3) comprobar en qué lista de las palabras más frecuentes del inglés (lista 1, 2, o 3) se incluyen los tipos y las ocurrencias empleadas por los chicos y las chicas en sus e-mails. Los textos fueron editados en formato electrónico y examinados con el analizador de vocabulario Range. Los resultados indican que 1) las chicas producen más ocurrencias pero menos tipos que los chicos, 2) los nombres son las categorías léxicas más utilizadas por ambos sexos, 3) las chicas utilizan más tipos pertenecientes a las listas 2 y 3 en sus e-mails.

**Palabras clave:** e-mail tándem, dificultades de aprendizaje, género.

**Abstract:** This paper aims at tracing the vocabulary profiles used by twelve secondary school Spanish students with learning difficulties (seven girls and five boys) to describe people their same age and traditional festivals in Spain and the UK thanks to an e-mail tandem exchange with learners of Spanish as a foreign language of their same age, belonging to a secondary school in the UK. Taking account of these texts, we will also aim to (i) identify the number of types and tokens used by boys and girls, (ii) the lexical category of the words used by both sexes, and (iii) check the wordlist (1, 2 or 3) in which the types and tokens boys and girls used in their e-mails. All the texts were digitalised and analysed by means of Range Tools. Our results indicate that (i) girls produce more tokens but less types than boys, (ii) nouns are the most frequent lexical categories used by both sexes, and (iii) girls include more types belonging to wordlists 2 and 3 in their e-mails.

**Key-words:** vocabulary, e-mail tandem, learning difficulties, gender.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it is generally acknowledged that there is a correlation between the level of lexical competence of an individual and their academic success (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Marzano, 2007; Meara 1980; Morris & Cobb, 2004; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Singleton, 1999). The benefits of acquiring greater vocabulary skills in native as well as in foreign languages affect both sexes. The study of the complex interplay between gender-related issues and language is not new, Coates (1986) analysed the stylistic features functions used by men and women in their speech to demonstrate that men and women speak differently. Jespersen (1992) called attention to the differences between male and female language in the Antilles. In recent decades, it has been supported in research conducted that the two sexes do not seem to make the same selection of words (see Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008; Mulac et al., 2001; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010 a and b; Weatherall, 2002). These studies focused on the words used by male and female learners in written production but to our knowledge there is a scarcity of research to analyse the differences in the words used by male and female EFL learners in e-mail exchanges. We consider this analysis relevant since e-mail writing has spread widely since the turn of the century helping millions of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds keep in touch by means of this asynchronous digital device.

What is more, the benefits of using e-mails as a pedagogical tool in foreign language learning has been acknowledged by scholars working on the field of language teaching (Belisle, 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001; Brammerts & Little, 1996; Chi-Fen, 2006; Crystal, 2001; Danet, 2002; Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001; Little, 1998; Nagel 1999). E-mail exchanges promote collaborative learning among students with different mother tongues, favouring the development of writing skills as well as coming closer to the target language community by contacting native speakers. Gonglewski *et al.* (2001) support that the use of e-mails in the foreign language classroom widens the time needed when writing in a foreign language since students do not need to be at a determined time in a particular room to contact the native speakers but they can write their e-mails at home or anywhere providing they have access to the internet, which allows them to have more time to read and write the messages. Furthermore, the interaction with people from different countries and nationalities allows learners to contrast different cultural experiences in order to be aware of the sense of otherness.

E-mails also become the authentic texts by means of which students from different countries interact authentically, so participants are supposed to be more involved when compared to their involvement in the traditional classroom, this also being more motivating for them (Nagel, 1999). Finally, by using e-mails students are not so tight to the teachers' commands since they can deal with the suggested topics in more detail providing that they are interested in them and they become a new forum for discussion (Gonglewski *et al.* 2001)

Taking account of the potential power of e-mails in the foreign language classroom, the *International Tandem Network* was created in the academic year 1993-1994 funded by a *Lingua Project* from the European Union (Álvarez, Blanco, Ojanguren, Brammerts & Little, 1996; Brammerts & Little 1996). This network aimed at establishing a net of communication among universities belonging to several European countries to promote the use of e-mail tandem as a way of improving students' target language command. This approach to language learning enables students (primary, secondary or university), as well as professionals to keep in touch with native speakers of the languages whose communicative competence they want to improve. These native speakers are also interested in improving their communicative competence in their tandem partner's mother tongue, as well as learning several aspects concerning the target culture by benefitting from their partner's knowledge and experience (Brammerts, 2003: 29). As opposed to face-to-face tandem where there is a direct oral communication between partners, an asynchronous written communication is established by means of e-mail tandem (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003: 49). As abovementioned, the writing and the receipt of messages are separated in time, which helps students analyse the content of the message they receive and they can make any comments they consider relevant to the tandem partner. Their learning can therefore be more effective.

This way of learning a new language is based on two main principles: reciprocity and autonomy. Reciprocity means that "each partner brings certain skills and abilities which the other partner seeks to acquire and in which both partners support each other in their learning in such a way that both benefit as much as possible from their working together" (Brammerts, 2003: 29). Autonomy implies that both partners are responsible for their own learning, so they decide "*what* they want to learn, *how* and *when*, and what sort of help they need from their partner" (Brammerts, 2003: 29).

E-mail tandem helps equality between both tandem partners because they must help each other in order to achieve the learning goals they have previously set. To achieve these goals, tandem partners should use both their native language and

the target language in each message and the ideal situation is when they write half of the message in each language. Using both languages also implies “learning from the partner’s model, [...] i.e., learning from a partner’s clarifications, explanations and information learning forms of utterance and behaviour from a partner, and learning from the partner’s corrections” (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003: 52).

In light of the reviewed literature on vocabulary learning, differences between sexes in speech, and e-mail tandem, this study attempts to trace the vocabulary profiles used by last grade secondary Spanish boys and girls (4<sup>th</sup> ESO or 10<sup>th</sup> Grade) with learning difficulties to describe people their same age as well as traditional festivals in England (Halloween and Guy Fawkes’ Night) thanks to an e-mail tandem exchange with learners of Spanish as a foreign language belonging to a secondary school in the UK. Furthermore, this paper aims at identifying (i) the number of tokens and types used by both sexes, considering *type* as a class of linguistic item, and *token* as examples of occurrences of a type (Nation, 2001), (ii) classifying the tokens produced by each sex by lexical category (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1993), and (iii) grading the tokens and types boys and girls are able to produce according to the most frequent 1000 words of English (wordlist 1), the second 1000 most frequent words (wordlist 2), and words not included in the first 2000 words of English (wordlist 3) (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>).

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

This study is based on a corpus of 15 e-mails written by Spanish EFL (seven girls and five boys) in their last year of Secondary Education. The research was carried out in a school in *Principado de Asturias* (North of Spain) and it is homogenous in the sense that all the informants are the same age (17-18) and belong to the same socio-cultural background. Besides, they share the same mother tongue, and have remarkable learning difficulties (Miranda, Vidal & Soriano, 2000), which is why they are included in a special programme called *Diversificación Curricular*. “*Diversificación Curricular*” groups are formed by students who have significant learning difficulties and/or a lack of motivation towards formal learning. Some of them might also have behavioural or psychological problems. For these reasons, the curriculum should be adapted to their needs, so that they can achieve the nec-

essary goals and competencies to achieve their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). This programme is recommended to be developed over the last two years of secondary education, i.e. 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Grade (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *ESO*), though it is possible to include students during its second year of implementation.

In order to promote students' motivation the methodology used implies two main aspects. On the one hand, they work in small groups which cannot be bigger than fifteen pupils on three main areas: Sociolinguistics (i.e. Spanish and History) and Sciences and Technology (i.e. Maths, Biology and Chemistry) and a foreign language (English). As far as the foreign language is concerned, it should be taught according to a communicative approach to help the students involved acquire the basic competences to use the foreign language (L2) according to listening, spoken interaction, writing, reading and speaking as suggested in the *Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas* (2001). Students are exposed to the target language for three hours during the first year of the programme and for two hours during the second year. The rest of the subjects (i.e. P.E., Religion, Arts and Crafts and IT), are learnt with the rest of their classmates in groups which should not be bigger than thirty students. This study analyses the work done by two different groups of students at 10<sup>th</sup> Grade during two consecutive academic years following the methodological approach which will be shown in the next section.

All the informants have a lack of motivation towards formal learning and particularly to foreign language learning, as, at the beginning of the programme, they all said that English was useless for them in their near future. Six of them show significant learning difficulties regarding understanding and writing. There are also five pupils who had been out of school due to bad behaviour and finally one of them has psychological problems which affect their interaction with school-mates and teachers. The rest of the informants are unmotivated learners but they do not suffer any other behavioural or psychological problems.

## 2.2 Procedures and instruments

In order to find a partner school, the Tandem Server at the *Ruhr Universität* in Bochum (Germany) ([tandem@slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de](mailto:tandem@slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de)) was contacted. According to the age of the participants and the aims of both schools regarding foreign language teaching and learning, the school was paired up with a private boarding school located in West Sussex (UK). Before the students began with the exchange of e-mails, the teachers who were involved in the project established an initial contact to decide on how to pair the students and organize the tasks to be developed.

The pairings were made at random, according to three main criteria. First, the participants were all 16-18 years old which is supposed to imply that they share common hobbies and interests, which is really important for a successful e-mail tandem experience (Gläsmann & Calvert, 2001). Besides, all the informants fulfil three requirements to facilitate tandem language learning since they can understand the text written by their tandem partners whenever they use their mother tongue, they are able to consider them as examples which are useful to communicate in the target language and they can ask their partners about aspects which may remain unclear (Brammerts & Kleppin, 2003: 158). Finally, being e-mail tandem an asynchronous communication, each member of the pair may check unknown vocabulary by looking it up in a dictionary or trying to find more information about a particular topic by using other resources (e.g. the internet).

At the beginning of the school year, a session is devoted to explaining how to work in tandem by clarifying that one of the main goals of this approach to language learning is to improve their linguistic competence in English with the help of the tandem partner who, at the same time, seeks to attain the same goal in Spanish. The exchange of e-mails was done twice a month in the IT classroom, with the students being asked to upload their messages to the school intranet. Once the activity is finished, the teacher saves all the documents and sends them to his British colleague making no changes in the original texts since this task should be done by the tandem partner. The main purpose of this transmission system is to be sure that everybody gets their e-mails regularly and answers to the tasks as it is required to avoid their writing about other topics which are not relevant for the activity.

Topics were selected following the guidelines given for face-to-face tandem (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003) which were adapted to e-mail tandem by Gläsmann & Calvert (2001). These topics should promote authentic communication that is why they should be open so that each participant can make use some of their knowledge derived from previous experience, ideas or opinions. Besides, topics should motivate learners to develop their work in tandem, and they should be asked to give their views on possible topics to be discussed during their e-mail tandem exchange in order to achieve their learning outcomes. Taking account of these criteria, five main activities have been suggested to be developed by means of e-mail tandem i.e. “Sharing personal information; exchanging information; eliciting and discussing points of view; being creative together, and talking about language and communication” (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003: 58-59).

*Sharing personal information activities* aim at discovering “their partner’s personality as well as their need and desire to talk about themselves” (2003: 58).

These topics are developed in the first e-mail students exchange at the beginning of their work in tandem.

Regarding exchanging information activities, participants become informants about topics on which they are well informed- in part, the cultural and social context they live in, but also aspects of work and leisure” (2003: 58). These types of tasks constitute the main part of the work done throughout the school year including the following topics:

Table 1: Tasks

Personal Information
Personal description: personality, likes and dislikes:
Festivals in Spain and England
Christmas
My school
Holidays

As shown in table 1, students were asked to work on open activities so that they can tackle them according to their own needs and interests taking account of their partners’ suggestions. They are also encouraged to express their own views on the topics, so that students can “elicit and discuss points of view” (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003: 59).

Since the main goal of this paper is to analyse and identify the number and lexical category of the words used by each informant as well as their frequency regarding personal information, personal description and festivals in England namely Halloween and Guy Fawkes’ Night, no reference will be made to the last three topics mentioned in table 1 i.e. Christmas, My school and Holidays.

Taking account of the main characteristics and principles of e-mail tandem, which have been presented in the introduction, at the end of the first term students were asked to e-mail the teacher according to the following command: Describe your e-mail tandem and talk about festivals in England. The text had to be 6 to 10 lines long and include a personal description of the partner and information about festivals in England. Three students did not answer anything so they were excluded from the sample, it being reduced to 12 informants (seven girls and five boys).

All the texts written by the participants were digitalised, checked regarding spelling and grammar to avoid the electronic count on words which are not present in Contemporary English Dictionaries. All the texts were analysed with

two *Range Tools* (*Range* and *Frequency*) (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>). *Frequency* processes vocabulary to provide word frequency, together with their percentage and cumulative percent in the corpus of e-mails analysed.

*Range* provides a range or distribution figure (how many texts the word occurs in), a headword frequency figure (the total number of times the actual headword type appears in all the texts), a family frequency figure (the total number of times the word and its family members occur in all the texts), and a frequency figure for each of the texts the word occurs in. This electronic tool also creates word lists based on frequency and range, and compares a text against vocabulary lists to see what words in the text are and are not in the lists, and to see what percentage of the items in the text are covered by the lists. The programme provides three baseword lists. The first (*BASEWRD1*) includes the most frequent 1000 words of English. The second (*BASEWRD2*) includes the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, and the third (*BASEWRD3*) includes words not in the first 2000 words of English but which are frequent in upper secondary school and university texts from a wide range of subjects. All of these base lists include the base forms of words and derived forms. The first 1000 words, thus, consists of around 4000 forms or types. The sources of these lists are *A General Service List of English Words* (West, 1953) for the first 2000 words, and *The Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000) containing 570 word families.

In order to test the hypotheses which were mentioned in the previous section of this paper, we will compare our results with previous research on differences between boys and girls in written compositions in English carried out with primary and secondary students from La Rioja (Agustín Llach & Terrazas Gallego, 2012; Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010 a and b) since *Principado de Asturias* and *La Rioja* share some characteristics regarding socio-cultural origin of the students involved, being monolingual communities where English language teaching is being promoted by means of several innovative projects e.g.: Bilingual Sections.

### 3. RESULTS

Our data show that boys produced a total of 295 word tokens and 128 word types, whereas girls used 334 word tokens and 122 word types. As shown in table 2, the means of tokens and types is higher for boys. These data differ from those obtained with primary and secondary students in *La Rioja* (Agustín Llach &

Terrazas Gallego, 2012; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010b) since girls scored a higher number of types and tokens.

Table 2: Global production of types and tokens.

	Tokens	% Tokens	Types	% Types
Boys	295	59	128	25.6
Girls	334	47.71	122	17.43

According to *Frequency*, nouns are the most frequent word types used by male and female students. As shown in table 3, nouns represent 52.88% of the total number of types used in the e-mail tandem exchange by boys and 56.4 % by girls. Regarding verbs, boys use a higher percentage than girls, the same as with adverbs. Contrariwise, girls use more adjectives than boys.

Table 3: Percentage of content words used by boys and girls

	%Nouns	%Verbs	%Adjectives	%Adverbs
Boys	52.8	27.8		7.2
Girls	56.4	24.8	14.9	3.9

As far as tandem partner's descriptions are concerned, we can classify the words used by our informants in three different semantic fields: family, free time/hobbies and personal information. The word *family* appears five times boys' e-mails whereas it only has one occurrence in girls'. Students also refer to family members (see table 4) such as mother, father, brother, sister and baby, but there is no reference to grandparents or other relatives.

Table 4: Types belonging to family members

	Mother	Father	Brother	Sister
Boys	1	5	3	1
Girls	1	1	4	0

Free time and hobbies are also present in the corpus and it can be subdivided in three semantic fields: friends, music, and sports. As shown in table 5, both sexes refer mostly to sports (football and tennis).

Table 5: Types belonging to free time and hobbies

	Football	Basketball	Tennis	Music	Friends
Boys	6	0	1	0	1
Girls	3	2	2	2	5

Regarding personal information boys and girls employ two main groups in their e-mails: general terms including types such as name, people or years, and words to refer to physical description, e.g. eyes and hair.

These data resemble the results found in several studies on primary and secondary EFL students' written compositions from *La Rioja* (Agustín Llach & Terrazas Gallego, 2012; Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010 a and b). These similarities seem to show that there are not big differences among these two groups of students despite the fact that students with learning difficulties are at the end of their formal instruction and their exposure to the target language has been longer. However, the fact that they have learning difficulties may influence the amount of words they are able to process and remember in the target language. It is also true that teenagers, as well as younger children, consider friendship as something very important so that is why they focus on tokens which refer to the activities their tandem partners do in their spare time.

Lexical verbs represent more than 50% of the types used by boys and girls in the e-mails analysed in this study. As shown in table 2 above, boys employ more verb types than girls whilst girls produce some verbs (e.g. is, has or got) more frequently as can be seen in table 6 where the 20 most frequent verbs used by boys and girls are included.

Table 6: 20 most frequent verbs used by boys and girls

Boys		Girls	
Token	Frequency	Token	Frequency
Is	9	Is	18
Go	5	Has	14
Have	3	Got	10
Play	3	Likes	6
Speak	3	Go	3
Are	2	Like	3
Can	2	Dancing	2
Like	2	Live	2
Likes	2	Plays	2

Lives	2	Do	1
Ate	1	Does	1
Drink	1	Drinking	1
Finish	1	Goes	1
Give	1	Listen	1
Got	1	Listening	1
Do	1	Playing	1
Drinking	1	Reading	1
Listen	1	Speak	1
Reading	1	Swim	1
Open	1	Tell	1

The most common verb used by both sexes is *to be* in its singular form (*is*). It is outstanding the fact that we do not find any instances of the plural form (*are*) in girls' e-mails as opposed to boys' who write it twice. The use of the *-ing* is quite frequent for both sexes which shows that the present continuous tense is commonly employed in students' e-mails. It is also noteworthy that girls combine present simple and present continuous in their pieces of writing since there are verbs with appear in the corpus in both tenses (e.g. play, playing). Learners consider possession very important in their e-mail tandem interaction since the verb *to have* appears at the top of the list for both sexes. Finally, verbs which refer to free time and hobbies are also present in the corpus, e.g. drink, listen, go, read, like or play.

As it was abovementioned, adjectives are scarcely used by both groups of learners. However, girls outperform boys in the sense that they use more adjectives although many of them are used only once in the corpus. Most of these adjectives refer to physical descriptions: e.g. blue, brown, tall or old (see table 7).

Table 7: Adjectives used by boys and girls

Boys		Girls	
Token	Frequency	Token	Frequency
Blue	2	Brown	6
Favourite	2	Old	5
Brown	1	Favourite	3
Funny	1	Tall	2
Lazy	1	Best	1

Long	1	Blue	1
Old	1	Different	1
Talkative	1	Free	1
		Happy	1
		Intelligent	1
		Quiet	1
		Sociable	1
		Special	1
		Thin	1
		Weird	1

As far as adverbs are concerned, boys employ a higher number than girls (see table 7). Nevertheless, the frequency of usage is higher for girls. Both sexes use mostly degree adverbs (very) followed by quantifiers (much, lot) and adverbs of frequency (always, usually).

Table 8: Adverbs used by boys and girls

Boys		Girls	
Token	Frequency	Token	Frequency
Very	3	Any	2
Always	1	Lot	2
Friendly	1	Very	2
More	1	Usually	1
Much	1		

Finally, we find very few instances of types about festivals in the UK i.e. Halloween and Guy Fawkes' Night. Thus, we find four types referring to Halloween (Halloween, sweets, trick and treat) and two about Guy Fawkes' Night (Parliament and Bonfire) in boys' e-mail but there is no reference to these events in girls' pieces of writing. This could be explained according to two main reasons. On the one hand, it has been checked that most of their tandem partners have provided them with very limited or no information at all on this topic, and those who have received it prefer to omit it since they show no interest in it.

The corpus was also analysed by means of *Range* and the results indicate (see tables 9 and 10) that most of the types and tokens produced by both sexes

belong to wordlist 1, i.e. the most frequent 1,000 words of English. Our findings also show that boys produce a higher percentage of tokens and types in this frequency band when compared to their female classmates.

As far as wordlist 2 (i.e. the 2nd 1000 most frequent words of English) is concerned, girls produce a higher rate of types and tokens when compared to their male partners. The results for wordlist 3 (i.e. words not in the first 2000 words of English) show that boys include a higher percentage of tokens in their e-mails whereas the number of types is higher for girls. Our results show a reduced number of word tokens which are not included any of the word lists but which are frequent English words being relevant to describe people, hobbies and *Halloween* and *Guy Fawkes' Night* (e.g. Halloween or bonfire).

These data evince that girls' vocabulary profile when writing in e-mails is higher than that of boys with concurs with the findings obtained in the research carried out in *La Rioja* with primary and secondary students without learning difficulties (Agustín Llach & Terrazas Gallego, 2012; Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010 a and b).

Table 9: Range results boys

Word List	Tokens/%	Types/%
One	269/91.19	106/82.81
Two	11/ 3.73	10/ 7.81
Three	9/ 3.05	6/ 4.69
Not in the lists	6/ 2.03	6/ 4.69

Table 10: Range results girls

Word List	Tokens/%	Types/%
One	299/89.52	100/80.65
Two	20/ 5.99	12/ 9.68
Three	8/ 2.40	6/ 4.84
Not in the lists	7/ 2.10	6/ 4.84

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The data presented in this paper show that boys produce more types than girls whereas girls employ more tokens than their male classmates. Nouns are the

most frequently used lexical categories by both sexes to describe their e-mail tandem partners. Nouns can be classified according to three different semantic fields: family, free time/hobbies and personal information. Regarding family, both girls and boys refer to their closest relatives (mother, father, brother and sister). Free time/hobbies can be subdivided into: friends, sports, and music whereas personal information includes: name, age and physical description.

Boys also produce more verb types than girls but female students include verbs (e.g. is, have or got) more frequently in their e-mails. Verbs which imply possession (e.g. have), preferences (e.g. like) and movement (e.g. go) are quite frequently used by both sexes. These results agree with those obtained when analysing primary and secondary students' written compositions in English in *La Rioja* (Agustín Llach & Terrazas Gallego, 2012; Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba, 2008; Ojeda Alba & Jiménez Catalán, 2010 a and b), which may imply that more time of exposure to foreign language learning does not necessarily mean that the informants are able to use wider vocabulary profiles in their e-mail tandem exchanges.

The findings also show that adjectives and adverbs are scarcely used in this sample. Nevertheless, girls use more adjectives than boys whereas boys include more adverbs in their e-mails.. A reason to justify the fact that adjectives and adverbs are rarely present in the e-mails analysed is the specific characteristics of e-mail writing which combine features from oral and written language. (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasonforth 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chi-Fen 2006; Crystal, 2001; Danet 2002), being the oral features emphasized in informal contexts such as the e-mail exchange between teenagers who try to avoid using a formal discourse which may include long descriptions, and, therefore, more adjectives and adverbs as pre-modifiers.

Regarding traditional festivals in the UK we find few instances referring to Halloween and Guy Fawkes' Night in boys' writings, which seems to prove that students were not interested in learning this kind of vocabulary since they mostly omit any reference to both festivals.

On the other hand, most of the types employed by both sexes belong to the most frequent 1,000 words of English (wordlist 1), which concurs with the results achieved by primary and secondary students from *La Rioja*. However, the percentage of types in wordlists 2 and 3 is slightly higher for girls, which seems to show that girls' vocabulary profile is wider.

As a conclusion, this study points out that girls with learning difficulties can slightly outperform their male partners regarding vocabulary to describe

their tandem partners using e-mail tandem to communicate with native speakers of the target language. Nevertheless, this is a preliminary analysis, and suffers from a number of limitations. First of all, the number of informants in the sample is reduced due to the characteristics of “*Diversificación Curricular*” groups are limited to fifteen students. Therefore, further research needs to be carried out to compare these data with the results obtained by a mixed-group of EFL students without learning difficulties in their last year of Secondary Education from the same school, who also used an approach based on e-mail tandem in their instruction, to test if girls also obtain better results according to lexical category, number of types and level of frequency of the words used (wordlist 1, 2 or 3) when compared to their male and female “*Diversificación Curricular*” partners or if, contrariwise, boys without learning difficulties outperform the rest of their classmates.

Another limitation is that we have just employed one instrument of assessment, i.e. the e-mail students wrote in their e-mail tandem exchange. Thus, a variety of specific tests should be given to learners in the future to assess aspects such as motivation, word availability, and the like to arrive to any firm conclusions. Finally, we have applied only descriptive statistical analyses. In consequence, though our results are suggestive, in order to corroborate whether the findings obtained are significant or merely a chance occurrence further inferential statistics should be applied to our data.

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