

The worlds children's words build

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Recibido: marzo 2007

Aceptado: mayo 2007

ABSTRACT

In this paper, framed in a research project carried out at the University of La Rioja, Spain, we have analyzed a corpus of 271 compositions written by the same number of students of about 10 years of age. Our goal has been to determine what words children of the fourth year in elementary school use when writing in a second language, and specifically to detect any disparities between male and female performance. The analysis of our corpus has contributed data which allows us to draw conclusions of crucial importance for ESL teaching and learning. Differences are slight but palpable, and, contrary to the hypothesis of Jespersen and others, females use both more types and more tokens than their male counterparts and the words used by the former are also slightly longer, suggesting a higher capacity for remembering on the part of girls. Also, we have observed some interesting aspects such as a clear propensity towards a «masculination» of the girls' language and a tendency to create humorous situations used exclusively by boys.

Keywords: gender, vocabulary acquisition and learning, vocabulary teaching, writing in L2

Los mundos edificados por las palabras de los niños

RESUMEN

Este artículo, enmarcado en un proyecto de investigación que se lleva a cabo en la Universidad de la Rioja, analizamos un corpus de 271 composiciones escritas por el mismo número de estudiantes de diez años. Nuestro objetivo es averiguar qué palabras utilizan los niños de 4º curso en una tarea escrita en un segundo idioma. En particular, nuestro objetivo es detectar posible disparidades entre la producción escrita de alumnos y alumnas. El análisis de nuestro corpus nos aporta datos que nos permiten extraer conclusiones de crucial importancia para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés. Las diferencias son ligeras pero notables, y contradicen la hipótesis de Jepersen y otros: las alumnas utilizan más tipos y más recurrencias que los alumnos, sus palabras son más largas, y sugieren una capacidad mayor de memoria que la de los alumnos. Asimismo, hemos observado algunos aspectos interesantes, tales como una cierta inclinación hacia la masculinización en el lenguaje de las chicas y una tendencia a crear situaciones humorísticas reflejadas exclusivamente en las composiciones de los chicos.

Palabras clave: género, adquisición y aprendizaje de vocabulario, enseñanza de vocabulario, destreza escrita en L2.

Les mondes batis para les mots des enfants

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail fait partie d'un projet de recherche réalisé à l'Université de la Rioja. Dans ce travail nous avons analysé un corpus de 271 compositions écrites par des élèves d'environ dix ans. Notre

objectif est celui de déterminer quels sont les mots utilisés en langue étrangère par des enfants de cet âge et, surtout, essayer de détecter d'éventuelles divergences entre les filles et les garçons de cet âge. Il y a, paraît-il, un consensus sur le fait que, par des raisons biologiques et culturelles, la langue parlée par les femmes est différente de celle qui est parlée par les hommes. Cependant, l'âge où ces différences se manifestent n'est pas évident à cause de rares études sur le thème du lexique concernant cet âge. C'est justement ce vide que nous essayons de remplir avec notre recherche. L'analyse de notre corpus nous a fourni des données essentielles pour l'enseignement d'une L.E. Les différences existent et, contrairement à la thèse de Jaspersen ainsi que d'autres auteurs, les femmes utilisent plus de «types» et «tokens» que les hommes. D'ailleurs, les résultats nous indiquent aussi que les mots utilisés par les femmes sont plus longs. Une autre observation intéressante: la masculinisation du langage chez les filles ainsi que l'emploi de l'humour chez les garçons.

Mots-clés: Genre; vocabulaire, enseignement, apprentissage, acquisition, habileté à l'écrit en LE.

SUMMARY: O. Introduction. 1. Socialization, communication, and language. 2. The language of women versus the language of men. 3. What do boys and girls write about in a class of English as a second language? 4. In conclusion. 5. References. Appendix. Notes.

0. INTRODUCTION

As we will see below, there is consensus in admitting that, due to biological or sociocultural reasons, the language spoken by women has characteristic features which differentiates it from that of men. What seems to be central to the issue is the age at which these characteristics of sex/ gender begin to appear. In spite of a plethora of studies conducted with adult subjects, the research studies done with infants and young subjects are much fewer. It is true that there are magazines entirely devoted to the language of children, such as *Journal of Child Language* which, with an interdisciplinary approach, publishes a wide variety of articles related to the linguistic behavior of the younger sector of the population. It is also true that many aspects of children's speech have been repeatedly analyzed: rhythm; acquisition and learning at different ages; bilingualism; the differences in learning between monolingual and bilingual children, among others. Nevertheless, studies which approach the differences related to sex and gender are far fewer, and some areas have been almost forgotten: for instance, much more attention has been given to spoken than to written language. In the same vein, attention to the acquisition of written vocabulary in the context of foreign language teaching at primary and secondary school level, and focusing on the sex variable, is rare. However, we believe that it is of crucial educational relevance to identify the vocabulary that children use and how and why they acquire it, in order to be able to draw educationally practical conclusions.

Our study focuses on the English written vocabulary produced by a group of students of homogeneous characteristics. It is framed in a research project carried on at the University of La Rioja, Spain. The said project, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, is centered in the acquisition and development of lexical competence and on the influence of the sex variable in

primary school students.¹ Our subjects have been 119 girls and 152 boys of an average age of ten who were at the beginning of the study attending the fourth year of primary education in four different schools (two public and two private) in the city of Logroño². In spite of the fact that all the data of this project have been collected in this Riojan city, we believe that the results can be extrapolated to most communities in Spain.

The data were collected during the months of March and April 2004, and are of different kinds: attitudes and motivation questionnaires, English language level test, receptive and productive tests, and a written composition. Nonetheless, our corpus for this article has been merely the compositions. Some of the work done includes collecting the material, classifying, analyzing, and describing the English vocabulary that these children have produced. The intention, arriving at conclusions relevant to second language learning and teaching. The compositions were written by the said group of children (271), and were begun and finalized within a thirty minute span in the presence of the teacher responsible and the researcher. The subjects had previously been informed of their task by means of the list of instructions in appendix 1.

In this first stage the compositions elaborated by the students were transcribed into a word processor and examined by means of a text analyzer program, Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1996). With the help of this tool, we have been able to obtain important data such as the number of «types» and the number of «tokens»³ used by the subjects, the average length of the words, and the proportional uses of types and tokens. By means of this analysis of the types and tokens produced by our subjects we intended to find answers for the following questions: Do girls and boys use the same vocabulary in a composition written in English following an exposure to roughly the same Input or, on the contrary, do they select different words revealing, in so doing, characteristics that differentiate both sexes? If the words they use are found to be of considerable difference in any way or if they are used in different proportions, does this have any meaning? At any rate, if difference vocabulary choices had not been identified, and since their existence has already been determined in adult usage, our study would have contributed some evidence that differences are formed at a later stage.

1. SOCIALIZATION, COMMUNICATION, AND LANGUAGE

It could be argued that human beings may possibly survive in a situation of entire non-communication and isolation from other individuals of their species, and

¹ This project, «*Desarrollo de la competencia léxica en la adquisición del inglés en educación primaria*», has reference number: BFF2003-04009-C02-02. We would like to express our gratitude for the assistance received from the government.

² We would also like to thank here the children, teachers, and administrators of the four schools collaborating in this project. Without their help this research would have never been carried out.

³ We know as «type» each different word that appears in a certain text, as opposed to «token», which is the total number of words produced including all repetitions and forms.

it is widely known that there have been cases of children who have survived in such circumstances: this was the case of feral children like Victor d'Aveyron, The Wolf Girl of Devil's River, and Amala and Kamala of Midnapore.⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that, in order to succeed, all of them seem to have been compelled to adopt a second beastly or animal-like nature. It could, therefore, be challenged that their survival has taken place without a certain degree of socialization. In our opinion, what seems to have happened in these instances is that human socialization has been substituted by that of the animal or pack that has adopted the human creature: a circumstance that supports this hypothesis is that when these individuals are snatched away from their surrogate parents they almost immediately succumb. It is also significant that of the three characteristics which have traditionally defined feral children since the scientific Carl von Linne published in 1758 *Systema Naturae*, one of them happens to be their inability to speak any human language.⁵ It seems, therefore, that some degree of communication is vital for man to grow and live according to the parameters which define human existence among the people who nowadays inhabit our planet.

But, if we accept that socialization, and hence communication, is essential for man, it is obvious that language will also be crucial. Although, in the last few decades technology has incessantly bombarded us with alternative ways of communication, language and its traditional manifestations: speech, writing, etc. are still, and will probably be for a long time, central in the processes of communication. Language, by virtue of a series of arbitrary conventions which the speakers of a given language share, makes the interaction of those individuals who master this specific code system possible: thanks to the knowledge of these language codes humans can describe, explain, ask, beg, order, love, fight, etc. In short, being able to understand and express oneself in a certain language seems to seal the integration of an individual as a full member of the human community which uses the said language.

It is undeniable that to master a language a speaker must have a good competence in all its areas, but meaning or semantic load seems to be central, and it is essentially conveyed by vocabulary. Syntax, understood as a system of rules by which a given language is governed, is of capital importance in order to put in motion the transmission and reception of messages of some complexity in an effective way. But, by itself, competence in this system, does not guarantee communication. On the contrary, it could be asserted that vocabulary alone can serve to establish a communication, at least at a basic level. For instance, if a child who is just beginning to use speech articulated the word «bread», we might, without exertion, conclude that he wants or has seen some bread, etc., depending on some of the following: the context in which the term had been uttered, the facial features of

⁴ We here qualify as feral children those who, having been separated from their biological mothers, have survived apparently protected by different animal species. From the XVII century to our days about forty have been catalogued, but in literary texts many more allusions and descriptions can be found.

⁵ Carl von Linne defined feral man as «hirsutus, (covered by hair); tetrapus (walking on all fours); and mutus (mute).

the speaker, the intonation and several other factors. Inversely, in the hypothetical situation that a researcher with a high intelligence quotient would have acquired extensive theoretical knowledge of the system of a certain language, without any knowledge whatsoever of its vocabulary, he would be unable to communicate by means of this language. Certainly, without some knowledge, at least intuitive, of the mechanics of a language, a literary discourse, for instance, could not be produced; but it is certainly possible to imagine a situation of some basic communication leaving grammar entirely aside.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF WOMEN VERSUS THE LANGUAGE OF MEN

Once the centrality of vocabulary has been established, we can add that among the information (social, cultural, psychological, etc.) the selection of one or another linguistic item conveys about a speaker, it also reveals its gender. Sociolinguists, studying the relationship between language and society or the context in which a certain language is spoken, have discussed for decades the differences between the language usage of women and men. As early as the year 1922, the linguist Otto Jespersen⁶ analyzed the speech of women in Book III of his work *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*.⁷ His thesis, which underscored the greater wealth of the male vocabulary in comparison with that of the vocabulary of female, considerably influenced later studies. Jespersen's point of view had its source in andocentric conceptions, in which male language was the norm, and the language of women was perceived simply as a deviation of this norm. Regrettably, his scientific weight caused an spiral effect, and many of the popular stereotypes still prevailing today were thus based upon this same valuation.

In the second half of the twentieth century, particularly from the seventies on, there have been several researchers working on these topics. Robin Lakoff is considered the first female writer who has analyzed these aspects of language in English: in 1975 she published *Language and Women's Place*, where she studies sex/gender differences in speech. Lakoff states that the obvious idiosyncrasy of women's speech is the consequence of an unspoken subordination. In her opinion, for centuries, women have been induced or persuaded to use a «feminine» language, if only to avoid social disapproval and scorn. To speak like a woman involved using more polite and «sweeter» expressions than men, avoiding assertiveness or insistence, and displaying attitudes which must reflect the helplessness and irresolution which fitted women's more «fragile» nature and personality. In short, to behave *comme il faut*, a woman could never display self assuredness, authority, or confidence in her own judgment, since those characteristics were closely associated with maleness. Though Lakoff's conclusions were criticized by other feminist

⁶ Otto Jespersen (1860-1943), an authority in English grammar, contributed to the advancement of linguistics and phonetics and led a tendency in language teaching which defended the centrality of oral language. His best known work is a grammar in seven volumes, *Modern English Grammar*.

⁷ See «The Woman», chapter XXIII Book III.

writers and accused of being biased and of reflecting, as those of Jespersen had done before, an androcentric ideology, her work revitalized the interest of researchers on the relationship among sex, gender, and language: many of the studies published afterwards sprang precisely from the need of corroborating, commenting on, or criticizing her hypothesis. At the same time, during the seventies and eighties there was a contrasting line of thought represented by researchers such as J. McGlone, Maccoby and Jacklin who, basing their theories on organic and biological reasons of brain lateralization, ascribed a higher linguistic ability to women not to men.

After Lakoff, studies have been abundant: of relevance in English language are, among others, those of Deborah Cameron, Jennifer Coates, Pamela Fishman, and Janet Holmes. This last researcher in her *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, arguing that the sexes use different types of speech, mentions examples of societies where officially women and men of the same linguistic community must use different words to designate the same objects. Among these communities Holmes mentions we can find tribes of Indians from the Amazon, native Americans, and Hindu people: this spatial diversity indicates a universal tendency among primitive people to differentiate the vocabulary of the sexes. In our Western societies, in fact, there are no terms specifically reserved for women or men, but there are certainly gender tendencies. A superficial consideration, indeed, shows that there are certain words which are easily identified as feminine, while others are more readily associated with males. For instance, it is not common to hear a man referring to an object or person with adjectives such as «adorable», «toodle-oo» o «gee-whiz». For the same exact reasons, a man, unless he is a decorator or an artist, does not usually show a high interest in colors or shapes, and it is usually kind of surprising to hear a man uttering expressions such as «I adore that turquoise blue suit», «your hat is adorable» or simply an exclamation such as «goodness gracious!». If he did, he might be qualified as effeminate. We are, by no means, suggesting that to categorize a man as «homosexual» is or should be derogatory; we simply observe that, in accordance with the current guides of social behavior, such a way of speaking would transmit an erroneous idea upon some of the personal characteristics of the speaker. On the other hand, few women (though they may ride a bicycle or drive a car), would recognize or use specific vocabulary of these activities such as «sprocket», «fork» or «axle box». These same conditions might be extrapolated to many other semantic families.

Differences in the use of language by men and women have been identified by sociolinguists in the most diverse areas. Perhaps one of the most popular scholars in this area has been Deborah Tannen who, starting from Robin Lakoff's ideas about the relationship between sex/gender and language, has published several books of wide diffusion.⁸ In *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, Tannen observes that women converse with the intention of building up an intimate relationship of empathy with her interlocutor, (what she calls «Rapport-talk»). On

⁸ Tannen has published some of the most widely read books on this theme, among them: *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*; *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*; *That's Not What I Meant!* ; *I Only Say This Because I Love You*.

the other hand, she believes that men speak with the main purpose of exhibiting knowledge and with the intention of negotiating and keeping a certain status in the hierarchy of his community (what she calls «Report-talk»). In fact, for this sociolinguist, the ways in which both sexes approach communication are so dissimilar, that a conversation between a man and a woman could be compared to an intercultural communication. An avalanche of opinions, published both on paper and on the Internet, has afterwards sprung from Tannen's theories. For instance, professor Howard Besser of UCLA⁹ in «Differences in Women's and Men's Usage of E-mail», points out that men and women respond to Internet communication in very different ways. For Besser, email is not, as a rule, favored by women because it does not lend itself well to the transmission of meta messages or paralinguistic messages, elements which are essential to establish relations in which feelings are involved. The tendency of men to dominate certain areas such as computer science, had previously been noticed in studies such as Lorraine Culley's «Girls, Boys, and Computers».¹⁰

Thus, there is consensus in admitting that, due to biological or sociocultural reasons, the language spoken by women has characteristic features which differentiates it from that of men. As we said in our introduction, what seems to be central to the issue is the age at which these characteristics of sex/ gender begin to appear. In spite of the many studies carried out with adult subjects, the studies done with infants and young subjects are much fewer. Likewise, there is hardly research concerning the differences related to sex and gender, and much more attention has been given to spoken than to written language. Joan Swann, author of *Girls, Boys, & Language* a book where the speech of both sexes in an school environment is analyzed, observes: «Studies of gender and language use have looked, in the main, at spoken language. There is little evidence available of systematic linguistic differences in girls' and boys' or women's and men's writing.» (1992: 21). In the same exact way, attention to the acquisition of written vocabulary in the context of foreign language teaching at primary and secondary school level, and focusing on the sex variable, is rare. In our country, Jiménez Catalán (2003) has analyzed the different strategies that both boys and girls use to learn new vocabulary in a second language, and she has demonstrated the existence of different tendencies, but more studies of this kind are needed in order to have a more global idea of the situation.

It is of crucial educational relevance to identify the vocabulary that children use and how and why they acquire it, in order to be able to draw educationally practical conclusions. A number of studies centered on the learning and acquisition of English in school contexts has demonstrated the following facts: a) the importance of vocabulary in the improvement of overall academic performance, (the wider the vocabulary, the better academic results (Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998); b) the relationship between the size of students' vocabulary and the grades of the texts they write. This relationship is especially evident in public examination, the more

⁹ The University of California at Los Angeles.

¹⁰ See <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/bibliogs/infotech/science.html>>.

words they know and use the better their grades (Meara & Bell, 2001); c) the relationship between the vocabulary of the students and their reading ability (the wider their vocabulary, the better their literacy) (Beck, McKeown & Omanson, 1987); d) the relationship between their lexical performance and the quality of the text they write in a second language (Linnarud, 1986; Engber, 1993). All these studies render clear that, as Tannen observes: «Different Words, Different Worlds».¹¹ So, there are numerous reasons why we need studies that help us find out the words that children use. These studies would open the door to the world children inhabit, and to have an understanding of this world would greatly help educators in the choice and design of pedagogical strategies and educational materials for the teaching of second languages.

3. WHAT DO BOYS AND GIRLS WRITE ABOUT IN A CLASS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE?

We have found differences between the words used by the girls and those used by the boys, and, though the numbers may not be shocking, they do show some important differentiation tendencies. The survey and analysis of the vocabulary produced by the young learners as a group in their compositions has yielded a total result of 22,714 tokens (10,530 and 4,905 word types for the girls and 12,184 word tokens and 5,651 word types for the boys). Taking into account girls' and boys compositions individually, the distribution of means for each group was as follows: 80.16 word tokens and 37.18 word types for males and 88.49 word tokens and 41.22 word types per composition for females. These first data contradict the hypothesis of Jespersen and others about the superiority of male vocabulary, at least at this age and dealing with a second language. Differences are slight but palpable: females clearly have not only a wider vocabulary as shown in their higher word types means, but they also write longer compositions than boys as it is revealed by females' higher percentages in the means of word tokens. Furthermore, the fact that the words used by the girls are slightly longer than those used by the boys, also suggests a higher capacity for remembering on the part of girls. The average length of word used is 4.02 letters (4.07 by girls and 3.97 by boys).

Once these differences have been demonstrated, we stop to observe some of the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects that the choice of words reveal and which have attracted our attention, among them the following have been identified: to begin with a substantial standardization of language which has gone much beyond our expectations; an incipient expansion of words that until not long ago were considered specific to male speech; a marked egocentrism in both sexes, together with outstanding materialistic inclinations; less strongly the world of affection reveals itself; and, finally, some strokes of humor which, oddly enough, have been used only by male participants

¹¹ Chapter I, *You Just Don't Understand*, pág. 23.

3.1. Globalization and its effects

The uniformity and standardization of the language in the compositions was to be expected. Globalization, not only mercantile and economic, but also cultural, has been fearfully advancing during the last decades: this is naturally being reflected in the use of language, causing a dwindling of personal, regional and national traits and characteristics. Considerations such as the power of «peer pressure» had inclined us to foresee that our study would substantiate the tendency of vocabulary to homogenize, but the obtained data reveal that cultural standardization, and specifically the linguistic one, widely exceeds our expectations. Two decades ago Jenny Cheshire, Suzanne Romaine, Joan Swann, and others identified and described the utilization of different varieties of language by both sexes, even in very young children: Swann wrote in relation to previous research:

One consistent finding across these studies is that female speakers, all other things being equal, tend to use more 'prestige' or standard forms of language than their male counterparts.

We have only limited evidence of how and when such social differences are acquired. It is clear, however, that, even among primary school-age children, girls will use more 'prestige' forms than boys, though the differences will be less systematic than between adult speakers . . . (Swann 1992, p. 24)

Nowadays, 'prestige' or correction as a specific differentiating factor between the speech of girls and the speech of boys seems to be receding. In our corpus, differences have not been found in relation to the politeness and correction of words and statements. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that this could be owed to the fact that in writing, both girls and boys probably make an effort to produce a more polite language than in speech. It is obvious that the colloquial varieties, which according to these researchers are more widely used by males, are also more freely used in spoken language. We also expected to find a vocabulary more specific of females and their games and of boys and theirs, but these expectations have not materialized.

It seems that, in conflict with the differentiating tendency pointed out by Swann, there is a thrust, enormously favored by the media, which push modern languages towards standardization. In the same manner that ways of life are speedily homogenizing all over the planet, speech is also suffering a loss of region, class, and gender identity. Perceptibly enough, in this case, the standardization is advancing thanks to the «sacrifice» of the language more readily associated to females. It seems obvious to us that language usage is experiencing a process of transformation in the direction of «masculinization»: it is mainly women who are adopting many expressions formerly used almost exclusively by men. Expressions and words considered «masculine», such as swear words and vulgar expressions, are used more and more frequently by women in our country. This transformation, however, is being done in a natural non-challenging way. In the fifties, to express oneself by means of offensive and rude words was characteristic of men. In the sixties the

practice began to be adopted by women who considered themselves more liberated or intellectual. Nowadays, this manner of speech is widely generalized, and it is no longer shocking to hear very young girls articulating expressions that some decades ago would have been completely unacceptable. The effects of this «masculinization» of language are clearly seen: as we have suggested above, few males use words considered feminine such as «How delightful!» and, if they do, it is surely in familiar contexts or in trying to mock women. On the contrary, teenagers and young women deliberately duplicate exclamations previously taboo and which are now incorporated in everyday practice. Perhaps, the utterance of vulgar or dirty words by older females is not hitherto generalized in public, but words such as «son of a bitch» or «bastard!» are widely used by them in private, and freely used at all times by younger females.

The compositions included in this corpus have displayed a clear propensity towards the «masculinization» of language. Naturally, given the age of the subjects and the context where the compositions were written, swear words have not been involved. What we have indeed been able to discover is the presence of an alteration of younger females' habits and ludic activities that have been reflected in their language. It seems that a recent «masculinization» of young females has taken place, an alteration which has introduced them into games and sports previously reserved for males. We can customarily see girls playing basketball or football, but we rarely come across a boy playing with dolls, and if he did he would become the target of many gibes and practical jokes. Anthropologists Ruth Broker and Daniel Maltz observed some years ago that the two sexes have very different ways of addressing their friends, and that, though some of their ludic activities might be the same, their favorite games were different. Ruth L. Boker and Daniel N. Maltz¹² referred to the fact that boys prefer to play football and girls house. But, in our opinion, this cannot be sustained any longer, the situation is now very different. For example, contrary to what Broker and Maltz might have expected in a corpus like ours, girls have used the word «football» 130 times, while boys have not used the word «doll» even once. Girls not only have emulated boys, they have gone further in their interest for these «masculine» activities. Once the contexts where this word appears have been analyzed we verify that girls use sentences of the type: «My hobbies is cars, and football [sic]»¹³ or «i like football»: so it is obvious that indeed it is girls who have modified their taste and, as a consequence, their vocabulary.

Something similar has taken place with the term «basketball», with a frequency of 30 occurrences among the girls and 69 among the boys. Examined once again the contexts of this word, the tendency of females to sporting activities which in the past were almost exclusively practiced by males is confirmed, particularly, if taking into account the higher proportion of male participants. In fact, some of the tokens used by boys also make reference to girls, as in the following example where a boy

¹² See Ruth A. Broker and Daniel L. Maltz, «A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication».

¹³ Expressions used by the students will be quoted henceforth with their syntactical and orthographical mistakes.

writes «My sister like basketball». What may have happened? It does not seem likely that interest in sports has diminished among the males, but rather that it has increased noticeably among the girls. Aside from the fact that this unquestionably reflects a variation of life style, for us, in second language teaching, it is also consistent with the current practice in coursebooks. We have verified that one of the ways in which publishers and editors have joined the effort to eradicate sex discrimination has been by means of a growing use of female characters who perform activities previously considered «masculine». This is in line with the abundance of female heroines such as spider woman, Barbarella, Cat Woman, etc., which are, in many cases, effeminate versions of an earlier male hero.

Meanwhile, female games and playing seem to have been displaced: only two subjects use the word «doll». Curiously, however, one of these subjects is a boy who, significantly, uses the word «doll» associating it to a girl and, in contrast, he uses the word «football» linking it to a boy in the sentence, «Helen have you got a doll. Petter have you got a ball and play football.» We cannot be sure here whether the writer meant to ask a question and has forgotten the question mark, or whether he has made a mistake in the order of the words and he simply wanted to produce a statement, but it makes no difference in our argument. It is true that of the two subjects, it is the girl who uses the phrase which is apparently more feminine: «I like playning with my dolls»; nevertheless, the alleged «femininity» of the statement is counteracted by her previous sentence «Do you like my helmet?» which would obviously be more associated to a male. We thus must come to the conclusion that there are clear indications of an alteration in the tastes of females while males seem to hold on to the traditional habits and stereotypes of the sexes. Could this mean a higher adaptability to circumstances in females than in males?

3.2. Egocentrism in children: being and possessing

Another feature which permeates the compositions throughout is egocentrism. It is well known that both girls and boys of very young ages perceive themselves as the center of the universe, and feel that everything spins or should spin around them. Investigators such as Piaget, who analyzed child egocentric feelings in depth and extension, notice that children under seven are incapable of distinguishing their vision of the universe from that of the others and, systematically, project their own desires and wishes on the rest of the world. From that age forward their thought slowly grows more abstract and logical and their egocentrism, gradually tempered by experience, diminishes. Our study has served, in this sense, to ratify that this centrality of the self continues operating among the children in the fourth course of primary education (age about ten). In relation to this aspect the analysis of the corpus of our project yields interesting results: for instance, the pronoun «I» appears in the fourth position in the order of frequency with 1,059 occurrences (574 girls and 485 boys), to this figure we should add the occurrences of the Spanish «yo» which appears seven times (2 girls and 5 boys); the abundant orthographic variants and the pronoun used in

abbreviation with a verb add 139 occurrences in girls and 131 in boys. All this yields a total figure of 1,336 (718 girls and 618 boys). Considering the brevity of the compositions these data are quite revealing, but there are many others which strengthen this point.

In keeping with this egocentric vision of the universe is the excessive use of other linguistic forms which express possession. It is remarkable that the possessive adjective «my» occurs much more often than «I»: «my» is, by far, the most frequent word, with a frequency of 2, 035 occurrences (1, 004 girls and 1, 031 boys). This figure, outstanding in itself, is augmented with 99 occurrences of the spelling variant «mi», used in exactly the same manner as «my». To these figures we can add the Spanish word «mis», used by boys on six occasions. The object pronoun «me» is also used 50 times and 11 of these occurrences have the meaning of «my» (8 by girls and 3 by boys). But, of course, the other occurrences also refer to the self and its possessions, although, due to the low level of competence in the language, only on five occasions have they been accurately used. In many cases «me» has been used in expressions in which the students, due to deficiencies in their linguistic competence in the L2, have made use of their knowledge of Spanish with expressions such as «me gusta» («I like»), «me marcho» («I am leaving»), etc. There are also 7 occurrences of a word «mys» coined by students, which seems a sui generis version of an imaginary plural of «my»: of this word we have 7 more occurrences (1 by a girl and 6 by boys). This same imaginary plural takes the form of «my's» with 8 occurrences among the girls. Finally, the word «may», first counted as the month of the year, has been proved, upon analysis of its contexts, to have been used 42 times as an orthographic variant of «my» (14 girls and 30 boys). In short, the total number of occurrences of the possessive adjective and its orthographical variants has been 2, 217 occurrences (1, 075 girls and 1, 142 boys).

We must, of course, bear in mind that, in this context, the abundance of occurrences of «my» must have been increased by the almost obligatory use of the formula «my name is».¹⁴ However, the number of occurrences is so high that the figure is important, even if we presume that all the students have used the expression «my name» at least once, and we exclude 283 (as many as compositions) from the total figure. On the other hand, we can compute the number of times that the verbs «have» and «got» appear, and in addition several occurrences of the Spanish word «tengo» that persist on the idea of possession firmly established in the mind of our young students.¹⁵ Among girls, the incidence of «have» was 170,¹⁶ plus 15 negative forms («haven't, haven't, havent) and 12 additional occurrences of «tengo» which together yield a total number of 197 — a figure which places the

¹⁴ The term «name» has a total of 428 occurrences (199 girls and 229 boys), but in many cases it has been associated to words such as «school», «teacher», «father», «mother», «dog» etc.

¹⁵ Some children with limited competence in English, but eager to express themselves have tried to use Spanish words when they did not know or did not remember its English counterpart.

¹⁶ When the word spelling is not known, girls employ communicative strategies to be understood, for instance, using spelling variants of their own such as «havee», havegot, haven or haver, rather than using the translation of the word into Spanish.

term in position 11 in a frequency order. Among the boys the frequency is lower: 120 occurrences, in addition to 10 negative forms «haven't, and 17 of the Spanish «tengo», a total of 147 occurrences which place the verb in position 12.

An additional evidence of the importance of the idea of possession in these compositions is the use of «get», a verb which at this basic level is used almost exclusively representing the idea of ownership. The form «got» is frequently used in combination with the auxiliary «have» but, since the former is used more often than the later, we can conclude that the figure obtained from subtracting the number of occurrences of «have» from the number of occurrences of «got» should be added to the tally of the idea of possession. For example, among the boys «got» appears in position 9 with 206 occurrences and «have» in position 12 with 147 occurrences, so there are 59 occurrences in which «got» has been used without the auxiliary to indicate the same meaning of ownership. The case of the girls is similar: «got» appears in position 8 with 230 occurrences, subtracting from this figure the 185 occurrences of «have» we still have 55 occurrences of «got» alone with the same meaning of possession. Consequently, to the occurrences of «my» and «have» we have to add those of «got» to figure out the presence of the idea of possession.

Thus, «my», «I», «me», «mi», «have», «got» and «tengo» give a total number of 3,701 occurrences: a figure which sufficiently demonstrates the egocentrism of these students in accordance with the stage of their psychological development. It is remarkable to realize that in these pieces of writing which have an average of 80 words an average of twelve references to the self can be found. The high incidence of «my» suggests a predominance of the idea of ownership: what young people are is much less important than what they have. One of our magisterio students doing her «prácticum» in 2004, wrote in her field diary and transcribed in her «Memoria de Prácticas»¹⁷ an observation about the students with whom she had come into contact which we transcribe here for its relevance: «La frase que siempre tienen en la boca los niños /as es: 'Yo tengo...` Los padres hoy en día, les dan todo lo que piden... Y claro los niños /as no saben valorar realmente las cosas.»¹⁸ This reiterated use of the forms which indicate possession has clear connections with our life style, and it seems coherent with the way Western Capitalism perceives the world. It simply reminds us that in our hierarchy of values possession occupies a predominant place.

Nonetheless, to attribute this inclinations entirely to our current economy and «modernity» is, in some ways, undue: the traditional Spanish saying, «tanto tienes tanto vales»¹⁹ authenticates that it does not only reflect newly acquired habits, but perhaps also the intensification of recurrent human desires. The frequent utilization of the adjective «favorite» is, in fact, in this same track of egocentrism and appears

¹⁷ A journal written by teacher training students during their period of practice teaching.

¹⁸ The phrase children always have in their mouths is is: «I have..... parents today give children everything they want And children do not value enough what they have.»

Memoria de Prácticas del curso 2003-2004 by Yolanda Fontecha Santo Tomás, Page. 58.

¹⁹ «You are what you own».

in position 11 in the calculations for both sexes, and in the same place for each one of the sexes. An analysis of the context where these occurrences take place once again reveals a universe where everything turns around the children's own feelings and desires. Boys and girls talk about their favorite animals, their favorite food, their favorite colors, etc. Obviously, it is also of primary importance for both girls and boys to express themselves the way they are, to present their personal characteristics to the others and, accordingly, we find the word «like» used some 318 times by girls and 235 by boys.²⁰

Nevertheless, to the materialistic ideas introduced by «my» we should add the emotional component that the accompanying nouns often contribute, since this adjective is often followed by nouns such as «friend», «father», «mother», etc. However, though egocentrism may be sometimes moderated by the presence of affections, it is still an egocentric perspective, since the nouns are in fact being used because of the relationship with the writer who is almost perpetually the central figure. The world is seen and evaluated from the perspective of the self in sentences like the common, «My favorite friend is...», «My mother is *identica a mí.*» («My mother is identical to me»). Affections (family and friends) seem to have equivalent importance for both sexes, «mother», «father», «sister» and «brother» are in the highest positions of the frequency list, but it is necessary to bear in mind that they serve the function of defining and delimiting the writer's space in the universe, in phrases such as: «My family is little My mother my father and I,». In other cases mentioning the father and the mother is once again related to the idea of possession, as is true in: «I have got two cars, my mother's car is grey, is a Mercedes Benz and my father's car is white, is a Audi.» The word «friend» is among girls in position 22 with 70 occurrences. Among the boys is in position 18 with 79 occurrences. But, though males seem to be slightly more concerned with friendship, we also observed that the antonym «enemy» appears only once, and is used by a male who writes: «My Enemys is Nano Asier and Sergio.»

The high incidence of the third person of the verb to be, «is», which appears in the second position with 1,975 occurrences (986 by girls and 989 by boys), seems at first to contradict what we have so far stated about the egocentrism of these students, since it might have indicated a focus on a third person or object, but a more detailed analysis has revealed that in fact it supports the idea of the centralism of the self. An analysis of the most common contexts where it appears reveals that in more than a 90 % of the cases it is in combination with the possessive adjective and refers to something that has a direct relationship with the producer of the word. Indeed, the above mentioned expression «my name is» requires the use of «is», but there are many other expressions such as «my hair is», «my rabbit is» o «my favorite color is» which once again revert to the self.

²⁰ Though the males use the third person singular «likes» more often than females, this does not mean a higher interest on their fellows, it is often the consequence of inferior grammatical competence which has made them use «likes» with the first person singular I.

3.3. Humor

Finally, we have found an interesting feature which seems to be limited to the males: it is the sense of humor that occasionally appears on the boys' writing, but of which we could not find a single deliberate example among the girls. A boy, for instance, observes: «My brader David Beckan. My gran fadar is Ronaldiño»; a second boy ends his composition with the format of a letter taking the role of David Beckham himself and attributing the personality of Ken Spani to his father when he writes: «My father is Ken Spani. GOODBEY. David Bekam.»; a third student, also male, writes: «My father is David Becham. My mother is Ronadiha. My grandfather is Valnisteroy. My grandmother is Betty the ungrly.» Once the complete Spanglish sentence has been adequately analyzed we think we can safely affirm that the lad had simply tried to translate by «Betty the ungrly» the name of a television soap opera character, «Betty la fea» («Ugly Betty»). Finally, our next male involves himself in a real orgy of personality impersonation in the field of sports when he writes: «My fader is Raul Gonzalez Blanco y my tfo is Deivid Bekam y my primo i's Casillas y mi hermano i's Figo and Roberto Carlos and Zidane.» Again the Mixture of English and Spanish words struggle to express (My father is Raul González Blanco, my uncle is David Bekam, my cousin Casillas, and my brothers Figo, Roberto Carlos, and Zidane»).

Among the females there is here an interesting case of humor, in all probability unintentional, that of one girl who, mistaking the expression she had probably heard from her teacher asking around the class to practice the expression «What's your name?» uses the whole sentence as meaning «name» and so she writes: «Heloy my guasyorney is Mercedes may dad guasyorney is ...». We verify that our interpretation has been the right one when she later writes: «ticher is guasyornein Don Crestencio» by which she evidently wanted to express «My teacher's name is Mr. Crescencio». The error, naturally, is due to devilish English phonetics: and the girl was trying to replicate what she thought she heard her teacher say: «What's your name?». The outcome is quite hilarious.

4. IN CONCLUSION

We can say that the analysis of the English vocabulary of these compositions written by students of the fourth year of primary education has contributed data which allows us to draw conclusions of the foremost importance for both ESL learning and teaching. On the one hand the data allow us to confirm that girls use a wider vocabulary than boys, as has been demonstrated by the proportion of types and tokens in both sexes; this, of course, suggests that in the fourth year of elementary education the mental universe of girls is wider and richer than that of boys, it also suggests that Jespersen's theory about the wider wealth of males' vocabulary does not apply at this age and in a second language learning context. Neither seems to be confirmed Robin Lakoff's statement about the more frequent linguistic correction of women's language versus men's: the girls of our study have not shown any higher penchant for the use of more correct expressions. However,

we have observed in girls a certain tendency towards «masculinitation» of their language mainly displayed in the vocabulary they use to refer to their tastes and hobbies: the words girls use have little to do with dolls or doll houses, but much more with activities traditionally considered reserved to males. Girls have «masculinized» their vocabulary, but boys have not emasculated theirs.

Our data confirms and strengthens the egocentrism that psychologists attribute to both sexes as characteristic of this age: the world that the girls and boys of our study have constructed is essentially egocentric, as can be reflected in the incessant utilization of terms that in one way or other are related to their identity, circumstances, possessions, etc. Regrettably, affections, although they are present, seem to be subordinated in their mental universe to the idea of possession of material belongings.

Another relevant data of our study is the presence of attempts at humor exclusively by males. But, there is no need of a deep analysis to observe that humor, once again, can easily be related to the material world: for instance, all the personification meant to produce a humorous effect refer to personalities, mainly from the world of sport, and all of them with high acquisition power and social impact. In short, at an age at which a comparatively short time ago they were all dreaming of being superman, or something of the kind, to save the world from its evils, they now mainly aspire to have things.

When dealing with a second language, the words of girls and boys, at least in this type of discourse, speak about parallel universes, in which the school, the family, and the friend occupy predominant places. This is, in fact, not surprising if we bear in mind the age of the children and their limited competence in the second language. What is indeed surprising, and gives us something to think about, is that the world of which we can see glimpses through the words these girls and boys use, is a world materialistic in excess, in which the prevailing values are beauty, wealth, fame, and the possession of more and more objects. Furthermore, a world in which the role models to imitate are basically males.

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APPENDIX 1

(DATA FILLED BY STUENTS)

COLEGIO _____ CURSO _____

APELLIDOS, NOMBRE _____ FECHA _____

(INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN IN SPANISH)

Imagina que vas a vivir con una familia inglesa en Oxford durante un mes. La familia se llama Mr. y Mrs. Edwards y tienen dos hijos: Peter y Helen. Escríbeles una carta en inglés, preséntate y háblales de tu ciudad, tu instituto, tus hobbies y cualquier otra cosa interesante que desees añadir.

Tiempo: 30 minutos
