

**Writing in an EFL context: *an insight into young English learners'*
*writing skills.***

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze how a group of 10-11 year-old EFL students improve their writing skills over a period of one academic year taking into account their attendance or non-attendance to extracurricular English classes. The data from this study was collected as part of a larger longitudinal study conducted by the UAB research group CLILSLA Project. A total number of thirty writings per period (time A and time B) will be analyzed following CAF measures so as to trace development of the students' writings. Since the students are exposed to minimal input learning and, in most cases teachers do not have enough preparation in order to teach writing to young English learners, the development that the participants will experience over an academic year is very moderate and can only be observed in some analysis measures. Results show that percentages are always better in the group who attends extracurricular English classes in both time A and time B but, students who do not attend extracurricular English classes show more development after a nine-month academic course.

1. Introduction

This study seeks to explore the writings of a group of 10-11 year-old students under an explicit EFL teaching context. Since research on young language learners' writing is a topic that has not been widely explored, my aim in this study is to analyze how learners of English as their second language (L2), who have Catalan or Spanish as their first language (L1), develop their writing skills over a period of an academic year. In order to have some background knowledge on the topic of young English learners' writing, this paper will present a brief review of the related literature which is significantly relevant for the present study. In order to characterize young learners, Curtain and Dalhberg (2008) will be used to outline a number of characteristics that young learners seem to share when learning a new language (L2). Regarding how the writing skill is dealt with in classroom instructed contexts in young learners, we will review Pinter (2006), who provides and suggests an extensive number of tools in order to teach writing in the best way possible and using motivational techniques for young language learners. In terms of research on the development of L2 writing by young language learners, three articles will be reviewed: Griva *et al.* (2009), Torras *et al.* (2006), and Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003). The objective of this paper is to trace the development of L2 writing in young language learners, specifically 6th grade students, over an academic course. Moreover, the study also aims to see if differences exist depending on whether those students attend or do not attend extracurricular English classes. In order to trace development of the students' writings, CAF measures have been taken as the main reference to analyze and interpret the writings. CAF measures stand for: complexity (C), accuracy (A) and fluency (F). When analyzing students' complexity in writings, this paper will analyze the instances of coordinate units (ICU) and the instances of subordinate units (ISU). On the other hand, when analyzing

accuracy (A), the number of error free units per writing (EFU) is going to be analyzed. Finally, and to interpret fluency (F) measures, the total number of words (TNW), the total number of words in English (TNWE), the total number of words in Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1), the total number of verbs (TNV) and, the total number of units (TNU) will be analyzed.

The research questions that guide this piece of research are:

1. How much improvement is found in the writing skills of 6th grade students over an academic course?
 - a. How much development is there in complexity?
 - b. How much development is there in accuracy?
 - c. How much development is there in fluency?
2. Are there any differences in development between students who attend extracurricular English classes and students who do not attend them?

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, an overview of the relevant publications that will help to understand the background of the study and, to have a general view of what has been studied so far in relation to young English learners' writing skills is presented in section 2. The methodology of the study is outlined in section 3, where the type of participants, the data collection and the data analysis of the present study are going to be widely detailed. Afterwards, results are analyzed in section 4 and all the writing measures will be presented by means of graphs and tables in which results will be clearly understood and where the reader will be able to see whether there has been an improvement of 6th grade students' writing skills over a period of an academic year. In this same section, a subsection on students' attending English extracurricular classes will establish a comparison with the ones who do not attend these

classes and determine which students perform better at the end of the course. After having seen the results, a discussion of the latter will follow in section 5. Finally, a conclusion section will summarize the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Young Language Learners (YLLs)

Young Language Learners (YLLs) are defined as learners from five years, up to around twelve or thirteen years. Why YLLs are special is basically because they are young children and this includes features such as their enthusiasm for and openness to the learning of new languages and their need for special methods to do so. The group of students that concern the present study are the ones who belong to ‘The stage of concrete operations’ (Piaget, 1983). Learners who are in this stage develop the cognitive characteristics of the concrete operations level and begin to understand cause-effect relations. They seem to be able to cooperate when doing group work, as it allows them to begin a more free approach to language learning. Notwithstanding, those learners do still need help from their teachers. However, they will continue to benefit from experiences full of imagination and fantasy and they will be able to structure a story form with its starting point, developing and ending, based on real-life characters that students know from television series/Internet or else, invented characters which will be product of their imagination. Some teachers point out that students bring together at this stage the vast majority of the vocabulary that they have been previously learning in the previous stages and can now make use of it by applying it to different and more complex situations.

Moreover, Curtain and Dahlberg (2008) agree that it has to be taken into account that children's L2 is completely different from that of adults. This is so because children use the so-called memory based-processes, which is a method based on the idea that examples shown in class (by means of flashcards, interactive whiteboards, whiteboard drawings, etc.) can be re-used directly in processing natural/real-life language problems by learning chunks of speech, whereas adults, use rule-based learning, in which they learn and understand rules that they can apply in order to generate structures. In addition, the authors claim that YLLs like learning while having fun. In other words, they prefer to do an activity outdoors with balls and other fun elements, rather than to be all day locked in their classrooms listening to the teacher's explanation. Therefore, whenever possible, YLL's teachers will have to prepare outdoor activities for these children to have fun. Children will appreciate the teacher's effort to conduct and outside-class activity and moreover, without noticing, they might be learning more than what they actually do inside their class.

YLLs present three main special characteristics: growth, literacy and vulnerability. YLLs and children in general are in a constant state of cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth that influences their learning. YLLs present a short attention span, usually comprising between 10 to 15 minutes. Therefore, when these children find it difficult to perform a task, they drop it out. Moreover, they might want to try and ask in order to please their teachers and for the teacher to see that they are paying attention since these children learn from direct experiences and they need to feel loved, secure and recognized when performing a task. YLLs develop a sense of length of time and a growing understanding of themselves and their peers and by this time, they gain confidence with themselves and reduce their dependency from others, although some of them get influenced by their peer groups. The second main

characteristic is literacy. YLLs start developing their reading and writing skills between 5 and 7 years old and their L1 oral abilities are already almost perfectly fulfilled, although their skills in the L2 might not be completely fulfilled because of the lack of knowledge. The learners in this study have completely acquired literacy in their L1 but not in their L2. Finally, the third characteristic that YLLs present is vulnerability. YLLs have a high sensitivity to praise, criticism and approval from both their teachers when they are at school and from their parents when they are at home. These children's self-esteem is highly influenced by experiences they have at school and therefore, they need to be highly motivated in order to perform the assigned tasks.

It is important to mention that all the participants who took part in this study are in a minimal exposure environment to English and that moreover, they receive explicit instruction by means of a textbook. In other words, these children do not have a great chance to receive real interaction or to make use of the English language in real settings since their English input is restricted to 3 to 3.5 hours per week and their English textbook. YLL's instruction is normally taught by teachers who tend not to be specialists in language teaching. This has an effect on children because they will not be facing a dynamic class in which they can learn and have fun at the same time but, they will face a class in which learning can be a boring activity or even worse, in which they feel they are losing their time and therefore drop their attention. Finally, it is important to highlight that YLLs' classrooms are formed by 25-30 students. Therefore, teachers cannot provide individualized attention to each of the students in class. This has a negative impact on both the teacher and the students since, on the one hand, the teacher cannot clarify doubts that the children might have and, on the other hand, children do not have the chance to ask the teacher for clarification and if necessary, for a second explanation.

2.2 YLLs' writing skills in the EFL classroom

Writing is defined by Dyson and Freedman (1991:58) as “a process-oriented, goal-directed and problem-solving process, which involves the writer’s awareness of the composing process and the teacher’s or peer’s intervention at any time needed”. On the other hand, Susser (1994:39) defines writing as “a recursive, non-linear cognitive process in which the writer moves back and forth between prewriting-idea generating, writing, revising and editing until he/she is satisfied with his/her creation” and according to Flower (1994), writing is regarded as a socially situated and communicative act. Understanding what writers do involves thinking not only about what the final ‘product’ looks like but also about what strategies students have employed at the moment of producing the text. Therefore, instructors should be interested in identifying what students can do while writing, also, in assessing their ability and knowledge when writing, and one of the most important parts, in giving correct feedback to the student and helping him/her to develop the writing strategies and their correspondent subskills, since research has indicated that the use of appropriate strategies can result in achievement in specific skill areas (Oxford *et al.*, 1993). Two articles which analyze YLLs’ writing skills in the EFL classroom are Pinter (2006) and Griva *et al.* (2009).

Pinter (2006) suggests effective ways to teach foreign language writing. Writing is a complex task in which children progress from the level of copying familiar structures up to recognizing text structures. Pinter (2006) claims that there is no effective formula to teach young children writing, not even the ones who have English as their mother tongue (L1) or those how have English as a second language (L2). Whether writing is introduced in the child’s curriculum depends on many factors such

as the age of the kids, the level of exposure to English, and their ability to write in their first language. The process of learning how to write in English is a complex one and usually takes a long time to acquire. This is because in English, the letter and sound correspondences are not at all direct and consistent. Therefore, English is said to have a 'deep' language orthography since, in English, how the words are pronounced does not always help to work out how this word is actually written. In order to teach those irregularities of sounds of the English language, all children are taught letter-sound correspondences at school so that, when they face with a piece of writing, they know which letter corresponds to a given sound.

Depending on the English foreign language learner's background, together with the writing system in their first language, children will need more or less practice with the mechanical basis of English writing. In order to make these first activities fun for the EFL learner, teachers can introduce a creative copying activity, in which the students select which words to copy from a given list and then, add one on their own. Other activities may include only copying the words that begin with the same letter or, copying the names that appeared in a previous told story. Moving outside the 'copying' activities, we also find activities which involve word level writing. One is the 'word snakes', in which students have to work out which is the letter that is missing in the word. Another popular type of writing practice is finger writing, which consists in writing on a different surface as well as moving and getting up from a chair at the same time. By means of this activity, children activate their multisensory approach and by using their own fingers, they can write in the air, on each other's back or in the sand in the playground. However, in most contexts, students use a course book and an activity book that contain both written grammatical and vocabulary exercises at word or sentence level, which will contribute to practising writing using familiar language

structures. Children begin very early to write basic words from their environment such as ‘mummy’, ‘daddy’ or a friend’s/sibling’s name, since they first will begin to understand that messages, stories, names, etc, can be represented on a piece of paper by means of symbols, which are, of course, the letters. On the other hand, many teachers use guided writing, which means that children should complete some kind of model writing with their ideas and relevant information. Usually, these types of activities involve writing in form of cards, invitations, letters, stories or even posters. This will allow the children to be aware that we write differently depending on whom we are writing to/for. Guided writing activities can be innovating because they allow children to expand more in their writing and therefore, they will probably write longer texts. Older EFL learners will also need to practice with word and sentence level writing but they could also be ready to do a free writing task. This process can start by first filling in some speech bubbles in a cartoon story or writing instructions on how to use a console for example. In addition, it is useful to use word processing because it is possible to have a good quality final product and the correction process will be then easier and less time-consuming for both the student and the teacher. Since we are nowadays living in the world of computer-based instruction, creating English websites is a great way to get older children practice and enjoy writing by looking up information on the Internet and then elaborating a piece of advice for example, for a tourist that comes to visit their city. Besides, children will be able to use writing for record keeping. For example, they can write lists of new words, dialogues, or short paragraphs as a way of keeping a record of what they are learning. Pinter (2006) claims that writing can be a useful skill in TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) provided that children are the ones who are ready and interested in the process of familiarizing themselves with the English writing system.

The second study to be reviewed is Griva *et al.* (2009) who seek to explore and identify the writing strategies of young learners and to find out their strengths and weaknesses. The study bases its theoretical framework on theories about 'writing' (Dyson and Freedman, 1991; Hayes and Flower, 1986 and Susser, 1994). Griva *et al.*, (2009) focused on the absence of corpus data concerning FL composing process of young learners within the framework of state primary education in Greece. This absence of data served as the main aim of this study. Griva *et al.*, (2009) posed a series of research questions to be answered within the study. In particular, the main research questions the study seeks to answer are the following: on the one hand, how young learners plan their writing and how they organize their ideas when writing, and on the other hand, if learners elaborate various versions of a draft when planning a writing task. In addition, the study also explores if learners employ strategies and if so, what strategies they use, the difficulties and problems they encounter when writing and finally, the strategies they employ to overcome those problems.

The sample used in Griva *et al.*, (2009) study consisted of 184 Greek-speaking students (52% female, 48% male), aged 12, enrolled in the sixth grade of state primary schools in North-Western Greece. All those participants have a previous four-year English learning experience in state primary schools. Most of the participants have been attending English language classes in private schools for five years (5%), for four years (53%) and for three years (20%). Self-report questionnaires were used to gather information about the participants' composing process, writing strategy use and writing difficulties. Moreover, verbal reports and retrospective interviews were done. Verbal report was collected from twenty 12 year-old students (seven females, thirteen males) while they were planning and writing their essays. Results describe the writing process and categorized a large number of the strategies used by the participants. The study

indicates that most of the young participants understood the control they have over their own writing. In addition, the study reveals on the one hand, that participants appreciated the need to orientate themselves to the specific requirements of a writing task and, on the other hand, that they themselves are aware of the need to improve their writing sub-skills. The results will give teachers a tool to understand how students write in response to assigned writing tasks and also, the possibility to identify the areas in which the learners show weaknesses and/or strengths. Moreover, results suggested that students need explicit instruction when writing. If students can receive explicit writing instruction input, they will be able to develop effective writing skills. Children should be stimulated to write with their own ideas and to draft as much as it is necessary to reflect on and revise their work at the same time they are being critical with it. On the other hand, the teacher's role is to encourage students' to develop the use of different strategies when writing, to help them composing through fixed/standard models, to notice the importance of the writing process and over all, to help them make writing purposeful in an instructional context (Ellis and Brewster, 1991).

2.3 Research on YLLs' writing

According to Archibald and Jeffery (2000), nowadays research into writing is divided in four different areas: teaching, context, process and product. Writing is considered a relevant activity from a very early age in an L2 classroom. It is important to acknowledge that L2 analysis of writing has been often restricted to the analysis of accuracy. Before the 1970s the teaching of writing was mainly directed as the practice of structures and vocabulary. Nowadays, this area has extended to include other issues such as genre, strategies and other aspects that are important to take into account too.

Research on social contexts of second language writing appears in the form of case studies of learners who are attending college or universities in which writing is seen as “a process of individual development in particular social contexts” (Cumming, 2001:7).

Most recent studies have focused on the process of writing where the use of the mother-tongue language (L1) during the composing process has been one of the main issues that researchers took into account. In order to measure the development in writing, it is important to highlight that the classroom foreign language acquisition should not be compared with native-like competence since, both the exposure and the quality of input differ greatly between natural and formal classroom contexts. In addition, the same happens when comparing writings in L1 and in L2 because the students’ indicators of achievement used for the analysis of written production will greatly differ from those indicators used to analyze native speakers’ achievement in written production. The analysis of IL development through learners’ written products allows researchers to draw conclusions on how to describe the characteristics of those learners’ interlanguage stage and therefore, to be able to measure change over a period of time. In addition, EFL writing might be a bit problematic, because it is usually normal to encounter different levels of proficiency among the different aspects that integrate the writing skill (grammar, vocabulary, etc.). However, studies that use measures to analyze written products focus on the one hand, on both the training of raters (Cumming *et al.*, 2002) and the raters’ performance (Lumley, 2002) and, on the other hand, on the analysis of the type of measures. Several studies have proved that holistic ratings of written products are not a reliable indicator of language development and change since holistic rating is not as informative as analytic rating, where different components of the writing skills are evaluated. This is because students might have different proficiency levels in the various writing components and this is not assessed

using a holistic approach. Two analytic studies, which analyze YLLs' writing skills, are Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) and Torras *et al.* (2006). Both studies focus on the relationship between the age of onset of acquisition and the development of writing skills and although age is beyond the scope of the present study, the data and the methods in these two articles are relevant to the discussion of our data.

Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003)'s main aim is "to show that the controversy surrounding the influence of the age factor in the acquisition of languages, is also determined by some factors which are external to students" (2003:137). The authors claim that nowadays, the relation between the age of initiation of learning a new language and the level of proficiency that someone acquires on this foreign new learned language is a crucial question. They pose two main reasons to argue on the previous statement. First, there is a huge aim in new generations learning foreign languages to acquire a perfect proficient level in, at least, one of the foreign languages they are learning. Second, there is a tendency to start learning a language the younger the better in order to become a proficient learner of that foreign language by the time learners are not more than 20 years old. Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) pose three different hypothesis: first, the age factor will reveal the degree of competence achieved; second, the older the students are, the better results will be obtained in complexity, accuracy and fluency (the so called, CAF measures); and third, the age of students will have an influence on the type of errors made in the writings. The participants in Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) belonged to three different age groups: the first was composed by 31 students of sixth grade of primary school (11/12 years old) who started receiving English instruction when they were 4/5 years old and, at the time the study was done, they already had a total of 704 hours of English instruction. The second group had 18 fourth graders of secondary school education, aged 15/16, who received their first

English lessons when they were 8/9 years old and who already had a total number of 792 hours of English exposure. Finally, the third group was made of 13 students of second grade in high school (17/18 years old), who started learning English by the age of 11/12 and who received a total of 693 hours of English exposure. The age of initiation in the foreign language instruction is a very important value for this study. Therefore, what Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) intended when taking different age-groups participants was to see the influence that the starting age of learning an L2 had on their written production in three different groups of students who have, approximately, the same time of exposure to the L2. In order to carry out the analysis and in order to avoid any influence on the final results, Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) gave a very general topic for the students to write: an introduction letter to an English family telling them about themselves, their school, their families, etc. The writing was carried out in class and no time limit was given to the participants.

The results based on the first hypothesis (i.e. the age factor will reveal the degree of competence achieved), showed that 17/18 year old students obtained the higher scores in all the values analysed whereas the 11/12 year old students, obtained the lower scores. Regarding the second hypothesis (i.e. the older the students are, the better results will be obtained in complexity, accuracy and fluency), the older students did better than the two other groups and the lowest scores were achieved, again, by the 11/12 year old participants. Concerning the third hypothesis (i.e. the age of students will have an influence on the type of errors made in the writings) showed that there existed three different types of trends. First, the 11/12-year-old students, made more errors than the other two groups in terms of spelling mistakes and malformation of number and gender, among other errors. Second, the 17/18 year old students were the ones who made more errors such as malformation of the words at a semantic level, misordering of

constituents, etc. However, these results have to be interpreted together with the CAF measures: the older students produced texts of high level of complexity; therefore, it is understandable that the number of errors in their writing productions is higher. Considering the 15/16 year old students, results show that they made more mistakes than the other two groups, concerning the omission of the article and the malformation of the verb tense.

To conclude the study, Doiz and Lasagabaster (2003) claim that “the main conclusion to be drawn from this study has to do with the ineluctable influence exerted by the age factor on a particular aspect of the individual’s linguistic development, namely written production” (2003:154). As results showed, participants who are older (17/18 years old) are able to write longer texts (fluency) and also are able to write more complex lexical texts (complexity). Finally, the lower number of errors found in writings was found as well in the older participants’ texts, the participants whose exposure to English began when they were already 11/12 years old, being therefore, more accurate than the texts produced by the other two groups of participants that took part in the study.

The second study to be reviewed is Torras *et al.* (2006), whose aim is to investigate the impact of age of onset of acquisition and length of instruction in the four areas of L2 written competence, namely fluency, lexical complexity, grammatical complexity and accuracy in two groups of YLLs with different ages of onset subdivided into three subgroups each with different number of hours of instruction. The sample used in Torras *et al.* (2006) study consisted of 495 EFL learners. The sample was distributed in six different groups according to the age of onset (AO) and hours of instruction. The ES (Group A) included those students who began receiving English instruction at the age of eight (AO=8) and had three sub-groups: the 10;9 year old group

who had had 200 hours of instruction when data was collected at time 1 (T1), the 12;9 year old group who had had 416 hours of instruction when data was collected at time 2 (T2) and finally, the 16;9 year old group who had had 726 hours of instruction by the time data was collected at time 3 (T3). The LS (group B) included those students who began receiving instruction at the age of 11 (AO=11) and it also included three sub-groups: the 12;9 year-old group with 200 hours of instruction when data was collected at T1, the 14;9 year-old group with 416 hours of instruction at T2 and, the 17 year-old group with 726 hours of instruction when data was collected at T3. The number of hours of instruction that the subjects received were spread unequally for both group A and group B: at T2, group A had received 200 hours of instruction over three school years, while group B had received the same amount of instruction but with only two school years. At T3, the remaining 310 hours of instruction were distributed over four years in the case of group A and in three years in the case of group B. In other words, group A received 726 hours of instruction in nine academic years while, on the other hand, group B received the same hours of instruction in only seven academic years. It is important to mention that all learners who took part in Torras *et al.* (2006) study attended state-funded schools and their instruction in English took part exclusively during school hours, with no extracurricular English classes. Therefore, the number of hours of instruction among all the participants in the study remained constant during these years.

The data for this study was collected by means of an integrative test of written ability consisting of a composition task on a given topic. The test was done in the participants' classroom by an external researcher as if it was an exam-like situation, although the subjects taking part in the test were advised that it was not going to be assessed as an exam. All the subjects were given fifteen minutes to write on the topic

‘Introduce yourself’. In order to analyze the written tasks in this study, analytical measures were taken. These measures were classified into four different areas according to Wolfe-Quintero *et al.*(1998), and were rated by researchers according to a previously established criteria. The results of the interaction of the effect of age of onset and instructional time on fluency, lexical complexity, grammatical complexity and accuracy show on the one hand that there is a statistically significant main effect on the AO of each area. When considering separately the results for the dependent variable for each area, all of the measures, except the number of sentences (fluency) and the number of borrowings (accuracy), are statistically significant. The variable shows that learners in group B, who started receiving English instruction later, outperform the younger group (group A) in the four areas (fluency, lexical complexity, grammatical complexity and accuracy). Moreover, group B learners are able to write longer pieces of writing, with longer clauses and sentences, display a great variety of content words and use more complex structures involving elements such as coordination or subordination and, what is most relevant, they produce fewer errors. Therefore, learners in group B are more fluent, more accurate and write more both lexically and semantically complex compositions. On the other hand, results also show that instructional time also has a great effect on the four different areas (fluency, lexical complexity, grammatical complexity and accuracy). In each of the areas, when the results of the dependent variables are analyzed independently, all the dependent variables are statistically significant except for the number of borrowings, as happened when analyzing the results of the effect of age of onset in the participants. The study reveals that the learners who have received more hours of instruction obtain higher scores in the variables included in the area of fluency, lexical complexity and grammatical complexity. However, accuracy does not show the same tendency since, contrary to

what we expected, learners who are already in T3 do not write more accurately than learners who have received fewer hours of instruction. In this particular study, the group (both A and B) having received 416 hours of instruction obtains higher results than the other groups in the number of error-free sentences and the percentage of error-free sentences (accuracy). Therefore, this shows the effect of instructional time, irrespectively of the age of the learner.

Torras *et al.* (2006) study considers the issue of development of EFL written competence as an effect of the interaction between age and instructional time. It can be concluded that an early start (eight years old) does not involve having a higher level of attainment when reaching the age of sixteen, after having been exposed to 726 hours of instruction. In other words, Torras *et al.* (2006) study claims that an earlier start in acquiring a foreign language (L2) does not mean reaching a higher level of proficiency or, a fast and more effective acquisition of the different subareas that form the essential part of the writing skill.

3. Methodology

This project involves research on young English learners' writing. The data from this study was collected as part of a larger longitudinal study conducted by the UAB research group CLILSLA Project. The data consist of writings done by 6th graders from a school in Terrassa at the beginning and at the end of their school year about their past, their present and their future lives. A total number of sixty writings per period will be analyzed following CAF (Housen, 2009) measures by which some specific parameters are going to be selected and analyzed further. Regarding complexity, number of coordinate and subordinate units will be analyzed. In terms of accuracy, only error free

units will be analyzed. Considering fluency, this study will analyze the total number of words per essay, the total number of English words per essay, the total number of Catalan/Spanish words per essay, the total number of verbs per essay and finally, the total number of units per essay.

3.1 Participants

For the present study, a number of 30 (16 female and 14 male) 6th grade students aged 11-12 were tested. The study was divided into two times: time A (first data collection) and time B (second data collection). Participants were asked to write the same essay in time A and B. Moreover, for this study the number of participants that attend extracurricular English classes has been taken into account. For time A and B, a total number of 9 students (30%) attended extracurricular English whereas a total number of 22 (70%) did not. All participants in the study had been exposed to 560 hours of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in a situation of minimal exposure (3 to 3.5 hours per week) at the time of testing, although students attending extracurricular English had received more exposure (3 to 3.5 hours per week more). Therefore, students receiving extra input of EFL (6 to 6.5 hours per week) are supposed to obtain better results in the second data collection (time B) because of their extra input exposure.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was done at two different times: time A (beginning of the course) and time B (end of the course). The objective of collecting the data at two different

times was done in order to see whether students with a minimal exposure to English (3 to 3.5 hours per week) improve their writing skills after one school year teaching in a minimal exposure situation. Moreover, students who were receiving extra instruction outside school were also taken into account observing whether they obtained similar or different results from and whether they improved more than students who were not attending extracurricular English lessons. In order to collect data, the participants underwent the following procedure: a composition was written by the students in their own classroom in order to assess their writing skills. In order to evaluate and analyze their progress in their writing skills, it was decided to ask students to carry out a *free* writing (see Appendix A for a sample). In order to control the students' writing, participants were all given the amount of time, 15 minutes, and the same topic to write about: *My life*. This structure was not randomly selected; it was done this way so that students could show their competences in applying the past, present and future tenses in the *free* writing they were asked to produce. However, not all of the students used all the time provided since most of them do have limited language proficiency when writing in English. Before students started writing the essay, they were given some tips to help them start writing and moreover, they were encouraged to write as much as they could in English. Dictionaries were not allowed in class during writing time. If the students had any doubt or problem with a particular word, they were not helped by the researcher or by their English teacher, who did not take part in the process. To avoid misunderstandings on what to do, instructions were given to the students in Catalan. In addition, the researcher explained to the participants that what they were about to write was not an exam and therefore, was not going to be assessed either by their own teacher or by the researcher. The aim was to create a calm atmosphere for the participants to write and moreover an anxiety-free testing experience.

3.3 Data analysis

Regarding data analysis, a quantitative analysis was done together with the analysis of Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency measures (CAF) (Housen, 2009). CAF measures can be indicators of the learners' proficiency and research has used CAF to measure progress in language learning. When describing what CAF stands for, complexity (C) is the most complex and ambiguous of the three. It can refer to both, language and task complexity. Linguistic complexity focuses on grammatical and lexical complexity. According to Housen (2009:464), "linguistic complexity has been commonly interpreted as the size, elaborateness, richness and diversity of the learners' linguistic L2 system" Within the area of complexity, two main measures have been analyzed: instances of coordinating units (ICU) and, instances of subordinating units (ISU) in the students' writings. At this point, it is important to define what it is meant by 'unit'. For the purpose of the present study, a specific definition of unit has been created so that it represents the type of language found in the essays to be analyzed. A unit is a meaningful utterance, which contains a finite or non-finite verb and an (optional) subject. The following examples illustrate this concept of unit:

- (1) Example of unit with finite verb: My sister is Mireia.
- (2) Example of unit with non-finite verb: I going to swimming pool.
- (3) Example of unit with optional subject: [] Play tennis on Saturday.
- (4) Example of non-unit: I very happy.

Example (1) shows a unit with a finite verb (to be) inflected for 3rd person singular, which also has a subject and a complement. In (2) we can see an example of unit with non-finite verb (to play), with a subject and a complement. In (3) we see an example of unit with optional subject (the subject has been elided) by the student since probably,

he/she is transferring the Catalan/Spanish structure for this type of sentences ([] *Jugo a tenis dissabte*). Finally, in example (4) we see an example of non-unit produced in one of the students' writings.

Continuing with the definition of CAF measures, the following measure to define is accuracy. Accuracy (A) refers to the degree of correctness a piece language is produced in relation to the target language rules. Regarding accuracy, one main measure has been analyzed in the participants' writings: error free units (EFU). The last CAF measure to define is fluency. In Housen's (2009) words, fluency (F) "typically refers to a person's general language proficiency, particularly as characterized by perceptions of ease, eloquence, and smoothness of speech or writing" (p.463). Regarding fluency (F), this study is going to analyze the total number of words per writing (TNW), the total number of words in English per writing (TNWE), the total number of words in Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1), the total number of verbs (TNV) and finally, the total number of units (TNU).

The underlying message of CAF measures is that as students progress in their learning, their complexity, accuracy and fluency in writing also undergo changes and become both lexically and grammatically more proficient and complex.

Table 1 summarizes the CAF measures used in the study.

COMPLEXITY (C)	ACCURACY (A)	FLUENCY (F)
Instances of coordinate units (ICU)	Error free units (EFU)	Total number of words (TNW)
Instances of subordinate units (ISU)		Total number of words in English (TNWE)
		Total number of words in Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1)
		Total number of verbs (TNV)
		Total number of units (TNU)

Table 1: CAF measures.

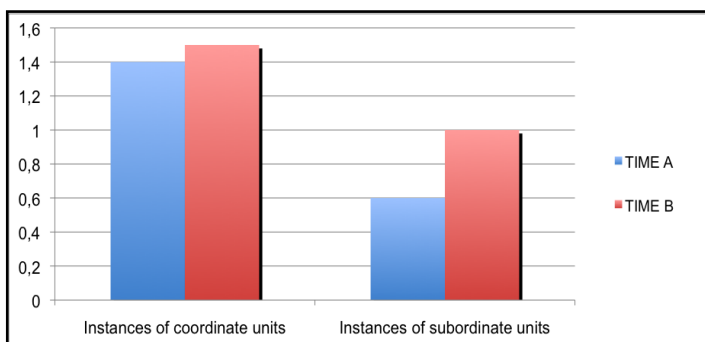
4. Results

4.1 General results

After having collected all the data in two different periods of time (time A/time B) necessary for the study, some general results will be discussed and analyzed following the CAF measures explained in section 3.3.

4.1.1 Complexity

The first measure that is going to be analyzed will be complexity. Within complexity, two main measures have been analyzed further. First, we have analyzed instances of coordinate units (ICU). In time A, students were able to produce 1.4 coordinate units per writing, which represents an average of 10.4% of the total number of units in the whole piece of writing. On the other hand, instances of subordinate units (ISU) were also analyzed and show lower results, namely 0.6 subordinate units per writing, which represents an average of 4.4% of the total number of units in the whole piece of writing. In time B, participants' use of coordinate units is roughly the same, 1.5 coordinate units per writing, this representing 10.8% of the total number of units per writing. On the other hand, when analyzing the instances of subordinate units (ISU), the students were able to produce 1.1 subordinate units per writing, which is a 7.7% of the total number of units per writing. Therefore, we can conclude that over the course students increased their use of coordination by 7.1% and their use of subordination by 83.3%. Graph 1 illustrates the development:



Graph 1: Instances of coordinate and subordinate units.

Some examples of the children's use of coordination and subordination include:

- (5) I want to be a psychologist and I love to go shopping.
- (6) When I was three my parents and me went to 'Port Aventura'.
- (7) I'm Alicia and I'm eleven years old.
- (8) When I was young I liked vegetables.

4.1.2 Accuracy

The second CAF measure that will be analyzed is accuracy (A). When analyzing accuracy (A), only one variable was taken into account: error free units (EFU), as mentioned in section 3.3. Some examples include:

- (9) It looked like a big funfair.
- (10) * I nothing brothers or sisters.

Example (9) shows an error free unit (EFU), since there are no grammatical or lexical errors in the sentence, whereas example (10) shows a non-error free unit because the sentence appears to be ungrammatical.

In time A, students produced 3.8 error free units per writing, which corresponds to an average of 27.4% of the total number of units per writing. However, in time B, the amount of error free units per writing experienced an increase. Participants produced 4 error free units per writing, which corresponded to an average of 28.5% of the total

number of units per writing, therefore experiencing an increase of 5.3%. The following graph shows the development of error free units:

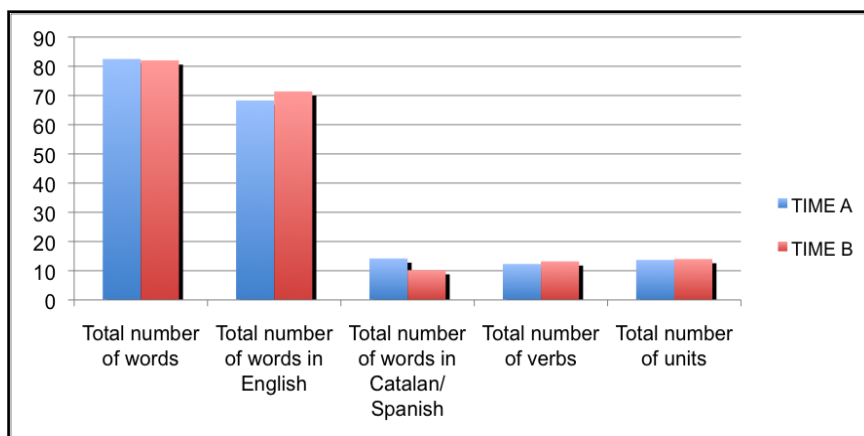


Graph 2: Error free units.

4.1.3 Fluency

Regarding the last of the CAF measures, fluency (F), following are described the results of the participants' writings. In time A, participants wrote 68.2 words in English per writing, which represents an average of 82.8% of the total number of words in English per writing. On the other hand, in time B, participants' increased the words in English up to 71.4 words, representing an average of 87.5% the total number of words in English per writing. Therefore, in time B students have increased their average of number of words in English by 4.7%. Moreover, when analyzing fluency, the total number of words in Catalan/Spanish per writing has also been analyzed as a relevant measure. In time A, students' writings showed 14.2 words in Catalan/Spanish per writing, this being an average of 17.2% of the total words per essay. On the contrary, in time B, students showed a decrease in the number of words in their L1 (Catalan/Spanish), this being 10.2 words per writing, which represented an average of 12.5% of the total number of words in their L1 per writing. Therefore, we can conclude that the number of words in Catalan/Spanish in our participants' writings has decreased from time A to time B by 27.3%. When speaking about the total number of verbs, the study reveals that there has also been an increase in the use of verbs from time A to time

B. In time A, students wrote 12.3 verbs per writing, which represents an of 14.9% verbs whereas in time B, students wrote 13.2 verbs per writing, being an average of 16.2% of verbs per writing. This reveals that students' writings were 8.7% more complex in time B (grammatically speaking) than in time A. This is to say, students' used a higher number of verbs in their writings in time B and so, their writings became grammatically more complex. Finally, when analyzing the total number of units (i.e. a meaningful utterance which contains a finite or non-finite verb and an (optional) subject'), in time A, results have shown that students' writings had an average of 13.7 units per writing. On the other hand, in time B, the participants' writings show an average of 13.9 units per writing. In a period of one academic year, students have improved their numbers of units only by 1.5%. Graph 3 below shows the results on fluency and Table 2 shows the summary of the results of the three CAF measures.



Graph 3: Fluency.

Time	Mean		Standard deviation		Minimum		Maximum	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Total number of words (TNW)	82.5	82	28.1	22	24	35	168	116
Total number of words in English (TNWE)	68.3	71.4	26.6	22.2	17	34	154	109
Total number of words Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1)	14.2	10.2	11.4	8.1	1	1	50	38
Total number of verbs (TNV)	12.3	13.2	7.5	5.8	2	3	37	24
Total number of units (TNU)	13.7	14	4.9	4.4	4	4	28	21
Error free units (EFU)	3.8	4	4.2	3.8	0	0	18	17
Instances of coordinate units (ICU)	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.1	0	0	6	4
Instances of subordinate units (ISU)	0.6	1	1.2	1.2	0	0	4	4

Table 2: Results of the analyzed CAF measures including the mean, the standard deviation, the minimum and the maximum.

4.2 Extracurricular English results

After having had a look at the general results (section 4.1), this paper is now going to focus on the results of those participants who attend extracurricular English classes in front of the results of those participants who do not attend extracurricular classes. First of all, we need to remember that participants who do not attend extracurricular English classes only receive 3 to 3.5 hours of instruction exposure per week. Participants attending extracurricular English classes, attend twice the amount of time compared to the other students. According to this, what results should show is that children who attend extracurricular English classes and therefore have more input, should obtain higher results than the ones who do not. However, results show that children who do not attend extracurricular English classes, obtain lower results in all

measures in both time A and in time B but improve more over the course than students attending extracurricular classes. Table 3 shows the Results of the analyzed CAF measures in the two groups, and table 4 show the progress/improvement group attending/not-attending extracurricular English classes and the difference between data collection times.

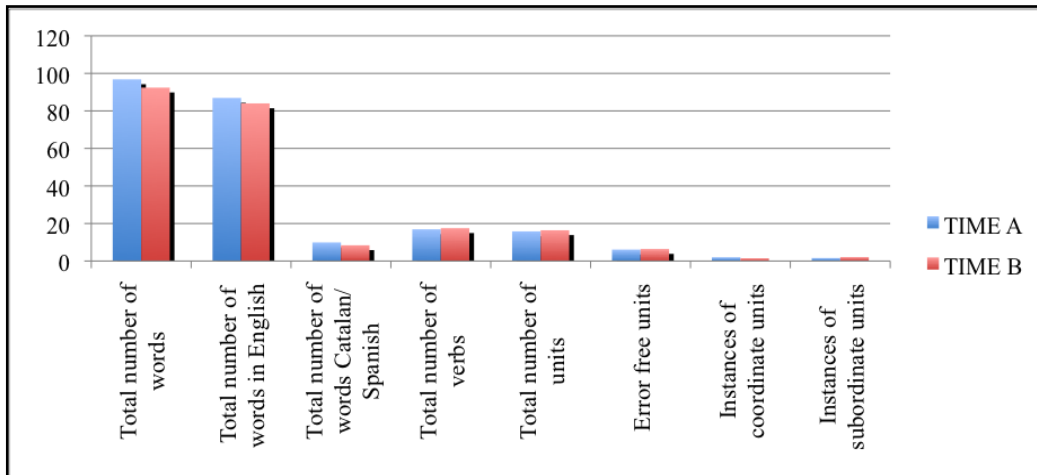
Time	Mean			
	A	B	A	B
Extracurricular	Yes	Yes	No	No
Total number of words (TNW)	96.8	92.4	76.3	77.8
Total number of words in English (TNWE)	86.9	84	60.3	66.9
Total number of words Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1)	9.9	8.4	16	10.9
Total number of verbs (TNV)	16.9	17.5	10.3	11.7
Total number of units (TNU)	15.8	16.4	12.9	13
Error free units (EFU)	6.1	6.4	2.8	3.1
Instances of coordinate units (ICU)	2	1.5	1.2	1.5
Instances of subordinate units (ISU)	1.6	2.1	0.2	0.7

Table 3: Results of the analyzed CAF measures in the two groups.

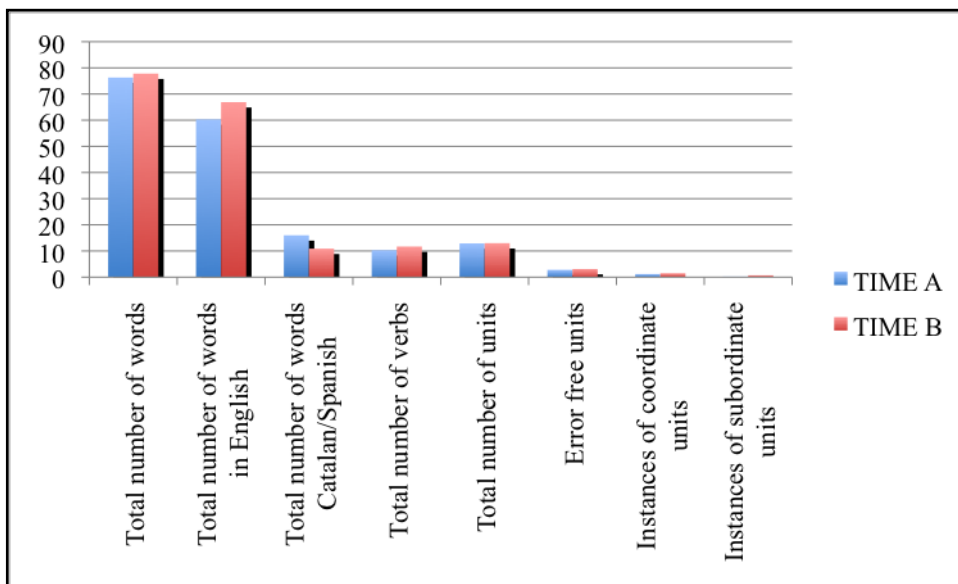
Group	Progress/Improvement	
	Extra	No-Extra
Total number of words (TNU)	-4.6%	+1.9%
Total number of words in English (TNWE)	-3.3%	+10.9%
Total number of words Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1)	-15.2%	-31.9%
Total number of verbs (TNV)	+3.6%	+13.6%
Total number of units (TNU)	+3.8%	+0.8%
Error free units (EFU)	+4.9%	+10.7%
Instances of coordinate units (ICU)	+75%	+25%
Instances of subordinate units (ISU)	+31.2%	+250%

Table 4: Progress/improvement group attending/not-attending extracurricular English classes.

According to Table 4, the group that does not attend extracurricular English classes, improves more over the course in five of the studied measures: total number of words (TNW), total number of words in English (TNWE), total number of words in Catalan/Spanish (TNWL1), total number of verbs (TNV) and finally, in the total instances of coordinate units (ICU). Percentages are always better in the group which attends extracurricular English classes for both times A and B but, students who do not attend extracurricular English classes show more development. Graphs 4 and 5 show the development of participants attending and not attending extracurricular English classes in each of the measures analyzed.



Graph 4: Writing development of participants who attend extracurricular English classes.



Graph 5: Writing development of participants who do not attend extracurricular English classes.

5. Discussion

We can conclude from the analysis of the previous data that in a period of one academic school year of 9 months, EFL students facing minimal exposure to the English language (3 to 3.5 hours per week) have obtained moderately better results in all the areas that have been analyzed. First, we will focus on the general results. Taking

into account the first of the CAF measures, complexity (C), students' writings were more grammatically complex in using instances of coordination and subordination in time B than in time A. Accuracy (A), that takes into account the number of error free units, has also increased, the students being a 5.3% more accurate in their writings in time B than in time A. The degree of correctness of the L2 writing tasks assigned to students is determined by the errors that the students produce in the assigned piece of writing. Previous research claimed that the repetition of systematic errors was a result of defective knowledge in the student's L2 but later, this statement was replaced in favour of the one that claims that errors are not more than a representation of Selinker's (1972) interlanguage stage, that can be defined as being the transitional stage in the development of competence in the L2 knowledge. However, recent studies interpret the errors in the writing productions of L2 students as evidence of progress in composition writing. Within this new perspective, the correctness of the writing task is analysed in relation to the communicative purpose that it has in relation to the assigned task. Finally, we find the last of the CAF measures analysed was fluency (F) in which the number of words in English per writing, the total number of words in English per writing, the total number of words in Spanish/Catalan, the total number of verbs per writing and, the total number of units per writing, have been analyzed. The total number of words in Catalan/Spanish is the only variable that has suffered a decrease from time A to time B. This shows that students have learned more vocabulary and have been able to use it in their writing essays in English and that therefore, they feel more confident in writing more words in English because their knowledge in vocabulary and grammar has increased considerably and they find that there is no need to use the Catalan/Spanish word if they already know the English counterpart for it. Taking into account all the other measures under the heading of fluency (F), results show that all of them have

moderately increased from time A to time B. Therefore, this reveals that students who underwent this study have considerably improved their fluency in English writing in a nine-month period of instruction in a minimal exposure situation.

Focusing now our attention to participants who attend extracurricular English classes, it is important to take into consideration that these participants attend classes twice the amount of time compared to the students who do not attend extracurricular classes. Therefore, and as previously stated in section 5.2, what results should show is that these participants who attend extra curricular English classes should obtain better results in all the variables here studied. Results show that percentages are always better in the group which attends extracurricular English classes for both times A and B but, students who do not attend extracurricular English classes show more development after a nine-month academic course. Participants who do not attend extracurricular English classes improve more in the TNW, TNWE, TNWL1, TNV and ICU over the course than the group who attend extracurricular English classes.

An explanation for the fact that students attending extracurricular English classes are better for both times A and B compared to students who do not attend extracurricular English classes and for the fact that general results only show moderate development might be found in the following arguments. Students attending extracurricular classes receive more hours of instruction, which inevitably leads to better results. This confirms part of the results obtained in Torras *et al.* (2006), which reveals that learners who have received more hours of instruction obtain higher scores in the variables included in the area of fluency, lexical complexity and grammatical complexity than learners who only received the obligatory school input of English as a second language instruction. English exposure in schools is not intensive since students have minimal exposure to input, which is not sufficient to improve remarkably. In

addition, the great majority of writings that students are asked to do in primary levels are guided writings in which the students do not have to think what to write but else, copy the standard version that the book provides and modify it according to their information. Pinter (2006) claims that there is no effective formula to teach young children writing, not even the ones who have English as their mother tongue (L1) or those who have English as a second language (L2). However, in most contexts, students use a course book and an activity book that contains both written grammatical and vocabulary exercises at word or sentence level, which will contribute to practising writing using familiar language structures. Many teachers use guided writing in their classes, which means that children should complete some kind of model writing with their ideas and relevant information. This will allow children to be aware that we write differently depending on whom we are writing to/for. Guided writing activities can be innovating because they allow children to expand more in their writing and therefore, they will probably write longer texts. Moreover, most of the teachers who teach in primary schools are on the one hand, not qualified to teach English to children and, on the other hand, do not have enough preparation to do so. This will lead to the conclusion that since teachers are probably not motivated to teach writing to YLL's, this feeling of no-motivation is automatically transmitted to students, who will not be motivated either and therefore, will not obtain the expected results. Pinter (2006) claims that writing can be a useful skill in TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) provided that children are the ones who are ready and interested in the process of familiarizing themselves with the English writing system.

The fact that students who do not attend extracurricular English classes improve more than the rest might be explained due to the fact that since they do not have extra input from English extracurricular classes, they must make a substantial effort in order

to achieve the same knowledge as the rest of students receiving extra English input. Therefore, and thanks to an extra effort, these students improve more than the ones who attend extracurricular English classes. On the one hand, this can be due to the fact that students attending extra curricular English classes might have already studied what they are learning at school or, on the other hand, that they prefer the more individualized attention that they receive in their language school when it comes to explaining the grammar and vocabulary of the English language. Moreover, in a language school, students do not have peer pressure as they might probably have in their schools and in addition, they are working in reduced groups, which allows them to be in an anxiety-free condition. Besides, in a language school there is probably more motivation both from the teacher and from the students since they feel more 'free' and confident in class. Students who attend extracurricular English classes receive more input and obtain better results but, in an academic nine-month period, they do not experiment as much improvement as the ones who do not attend English extracurricular activities. Students attending extracurricular English classes are used to facing free or guided writing activities since they probably practise writing in a more relaxed way in their language school. Their improvement will not be as noticeable as the one that students who do not attend extracurricular English classes have when comparing their writing production over an academic course.

6. Conclusion

The study attempted to analyze how a group of 10-11 year-old EFL students improve their writing skills over a period of one academic year taking into account their

attendance or non-attendance to extracurricular English classes. In order to trace development of the students' writings, CAF measures have been taken as the main reference to analyze and interpret the writings. General results show that the development is very moderate and can only be observed in certain areas of analysis. Contrary to what we expected before the study, results show that children who do not attend extracurricular English classes, obtain lower results in all measures in both time A and in time B but improve more over the course than students attending extracurricular classes; that is to say, percentages are always better in the group which attends extracurricular English classes for both times A and B but, students who do not attend extracurricular English classes show more development over an academic nine-month course. Minimal exposure and non-qualified teachers seem to be the key elements in the process.

It has become apparent that students do need extra input of writing activities so as to improve their academic writing skills. So as to make this happen, teachers could provide students an extra dossier, a-part from their textbooks, with a selection of writing activities of different types. At first, students should be guided to get familiarized with the structure that writings need to have, and then, teachers could allow students to develop free writing activities. This way, students will feel more autonomous when they face a writing activity and therefore, they would be able to write in a more anxiety-free context and more confident with themselves.

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APPENDIX A

Writing Samples

Student 6

Im Dani I 12 years old. I'm go to shcool at 9 o'clock I'm go to 6th of primari. I like milkshakes chocolat i and pizza. I don't like ice-cream. When I was young I like vegetables but I don't like vegetables. I love animals. I like dogs. I have one dog this name is Aria it is "Pastor Alemany". I lik skate and hanbol. My team of hanbol is bad sometimes winner but it is 4th of the ligue. I going to to another team it is better than my team.

Student 25

I'm Julia. I'm from Terrassa, but I live in a big house in Matapedra with my mum , Olga; my dad, Pere and my sister, Helena. About my past I can say that I was a cheerful and happy girl, I had a lot of friends and I didn't worry about anything. About my present I can say that I have a lot of friends too, but I'm so worried about my future, next year I will start a new life in Hannover, Germany. I will live there for 2 years, I'm excited but a bit nervous too...

I like dancing, singing and going out with friends.