

Development of Verb Use in English-As-A-Foreign-Language Primary and Secondary School Learners

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper analyses verb production in the essays of children and adolescent learners of English as a foreign language. Studies about verb production in the FL examine verb types, order of acquisition of verbs and verb types, order of production of verb types, or production of general purpose verbs. Nonetheless, attempts at exploring verb development of an English learning student population along several years are inexistent. The writings of 199 EFL learners were scrutinized twice for verb production. Data collection took place when learners were in 4th grade and four years later in grade 8. Results show that not only did older learners produce more verb tokens, they also produced more verb types and increased their production in all the measures taken. We interpret these findings as verbs playing a crucial role in linguistic, cognitive and discursive development; verbs as a reflection of learners' inner world. Additionally, we consider the role of schooling in verb production and the difficulties of learners in producing cognates.

Key words: Verb use, EFL learners, Primary school learners, Secondary school learners, Longitudinal study

INTRODUCTION

Verbs are important lexical items, because they evidence the relationship between lexis and syntax. The verb is the word that designates actions, states, and events. It is the nucleus of the predicate of the sentence. English verbs provide language, and syntactic structures with meaning, they encode much information and therefore they are central in language development in both the L1 and the L2. Despite the relevant role that verbs plays in structuring the discourse and in communication, there is a paucity of studies dealing with verb development in the foreign language.

Literature Review: Verb use and development in English

How L2 learners acquire and use verbs has been a recurrent issue of research along the decades. However, studies that examine the verb profile of EFL learners are still needed. The studies of verb use and verb development can be ascribed to four different trends. First, studies dealing with the order of acquisition of word classes. Traditionally, these studies acknowledge that, for English, nouns or object names are the first to be acquired by children and L2 learners, followed by verbs, adjectives and finally adverbs (Gentner 1982). Frequency of input, lack of cognitive complexity which is linked to the quick and easy identification of (some) nouns in real life (concrete referents), and conceptual development are the factors alluded to when accounting for order of acquisition of word classes. English verbs are more difficult to acquire than English nouns, because they depend on some language-specific knowledge related to syntax and semantic components (think of motion, manner, telicity, and other aspects encoded in verbs) and takes thus a higher cognitive load (Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg 1998, Myles 2004, VanPatten 2004).¹ In studies devoted to L2 acquisition, research notes that nouns and fixed expressions come first in L2 acquisition (Schmitt 1998, San Mateo Valdehita 2003/2004 for Spanish FL). In particular, concrete nouns and those easily imaginable are learned before abstract ones (Sökmen 1997). Similarly, cognates are also easy and appear early in L2 productions. In studies about lexical availability in Spanish FL, the most frequently available words are nouns, followed by verbs and adjectives in varying positions depending on the semantic field (Kalan 2009). The early appearance of more to less fixed expression bases on the idea that because they make up a single unit of meaning they are learned unanalysed as a single lexical item (Wray 2002). Furthermore, these fixed expressions have been proved highly effective in communication (e.g. Wray and Fitzpatrick 2010). The pre-eminence of semi-fixed patterns in early language may be the consequence of an inability on part of young and beginner learners to analyse language and linguistic structures into their components. Some examples in our data of early chunks from child English L2 learners are:

- ❖ *my guasyorney [What's your name] is Pablo for My name is Pablo,*
- ❖ *my happy birthday is in the autumn for My birthday is in the autumn,*

- ❖ ¿jagwoldayu? for how old are you? or
- ❖ whats for what is.

The second current of verb studies is concerned with the identification of verb types and verb tokens in the production of English native speakers and of EFL learners. Comparisons between these two groups are frequent within this trend. One of the most outstanding studies within this current is the one by Harley and King (1989) in which they described verb production of young L1 and L2 learners. In general, non-native learners and young L1 users produce fewer verb tokens, but especially fewer verb types. In other words, their production of verbs shows a more limited diversity than that of more advanced learners or fully proficient native speakers (Broeder, Extra and van Hout 1993). As learners grow older and more proficient in linguistic, metalinguistic and cognitive terms, their production of verb tokens, and in particular that of verb types increases. Marsden and David (2008) noted that as verbs increase with proficiency, nouns tend to decrease. They highlight the important implications this finding may have in assessment descriptors, e.g. should verbs be indicative of more proficient productions?, and for pedagogy, e.g. should we emphasize the teaching of verbs and verbal structures to make the language of learners more proficient-like? As concerns total verb token and type production, these studies show that proficiency plays a more relevant role than L1/L2 status of the target language. Learners' age may as well be determinant in their verb production with older L1 users and L2 learners producing higher number of verb types and verb tokens. Cognitive development and metalinguistic awareness may account for this.

Other interesting finding in Harley and King (1989) is that L1 users produced fewer lexical errors in verbs, were lexically more varied, specific and sophisticated than L2 learners. L2 learners, on their part, used a greater proportion of highly frequent verbs than L1 speakers, failed to use verbs that present semantic, syntactic or morphological difficulties, and in line with other results (cf. Zyzik 2009) showed great influence of the L1: they did not use verbs that have no direct L1 translation, and tended to project aspects of L1 verbs into their L2.

Still a third trend in verb research studies refers to the order of acquisition of the different verb types in L1 and L2. There are many different classifications of verbs in the literature. For English, some taxonomies use a functional perspective (lexical and auxiliary verbs), a formal or morphological one (phrasal verbs, reflexive verbs), a syntactic (transitive, intransitive, ditransitive, ergative), and finally some classify verbs according to their lexical domain or meaning (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal Usón 2006). Andersen and Shirai (1994) follow a traditional approach within this last trend, and categorize English verbs into four classes according to their semantic aspect. Thus they distinguish among: 1) states (*have, be*) which depict a permanent situation with no end point, 2) activities (*run, play, swim*) are durative and have a beginning and an arbitrary end point, 3) accomplishments (*drown*) are durative and have an inherent end point, and 4) achievements (*realize*) are momentaneous and punctual. States and activities are easier to acquire than accomplishments and achievements, so they tend to appear earlier in the learners' language. This may have to do with the acquisition of tense/aspect, which is hard and takes long; thus verbs which inherently express aspectual nuances come later in acquisition. This is in line with previous claims that verbs in English are more difficult to learn than other word types, because they encode more information. The more information the verb includes, the more difficult to acquire. Other authors (Shatz, Wellman, Silber 1983) prefer to classify verbs into those that express a mental activity (*think, dream, know, believe*) or a physical one (*run, swim, ride*), or the ones used for communication (*say, tell*). Mental verbs appear first at later stages of acquisition, since they require some previous linguistic knowledge to be used (Shatz, Wellman, Silber 1983). One of the most widely used verb classification is the one by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 2004). Halliday distinguishes six process types: material, behavioural, mental (perception, affection, cognition), verbal, relational, existential. The meaning of the verbs, their frequency in the input or their syntactic characteristics or salience make some verbs less demanding in cognitive terms (e.g. the encode less semantic, or syntactic information) and hence easier for acquisition. Accordingly, Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg (1998) state that verbs such as *play, eat, go, tickle, open, fall* are almost always produced earlier than *give, drop, pull, hug*. The variables that determine order of acquisition of verbs are verb meaning concreteness, socio-pragmatic cues available for interaction, and especially, frequency of verb in input, verb appearing in final position, and variety of syntactic frames in which the verb appears (Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg 1998). For L2, verb learning implies a re-conceptualization of the world and its categories as expressed by verbs. The variables that contribute to this process of L2 verb learning are: cognitive load, resemblance L1-L2, communicative value, frequency in input.

Finally, the fourth trend that we could identify in verb studies deals with general purpose verbs and their use by learners with different characteristics: L1 vs. L2, "normally" developed children vs. children with hearing and/or speaking impairments, beginner vs. advanced L2 learners. General purpose verbs are those which appear frequently in the input, are short (mainly monosyllabic), and allow for syntactic and semantic non-specificity (cf. Kelly 1997). Examples of general purpose verbs are: *do, put, go, make*. Results in this case are contradictory, although generally lower level learners produce more general purpose verbs.

In general, we could observe that most of the studies that address verb production examine L1 development, compare L1 with L2 acquisition or explore verb use from the perspective of purely syntactic development (e.g. Meisel et al. 1981). However, only few studies explore exclusively L2 verb use (Harley and King 1989, Broeder, Extra and van Hout 1993, Myles 2005, Marsden and David 2008). These studies found that verb production increases with L2 proficiency and cognitive development. Henceforth, verbs are considered to be good indicators of L2 proficiency. Among the studies that do indeed give attention to L2 verb production we find cross-sectional studies, and studies that focus on the lexical domain of verbs, especially movement verbs (Cadierno 2004, Cadierno and Lund 2004, Antonijević and Berthaud 2009, Navarro and Nicoladis 2005). Longitudinal studies within this trend are rare.

In the present paper, we intend to describe verb production of a sample of L2 learners along 5 five years of their acquisition process. In particular, 1) we want to find out about how verb type and verb token production evolves with

time, age, and increasing proficiency level, these three variables co-occur in the present study. We are also interested in 2) examining the order of acquisition of the different verb types along these five years and proficiency levels. And finally, 3) the production of general purpose verbs in the different moments tested will also be object of study in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper claims novelty since it presents a longitudinal study of 5 years with two moments of data collection. Data were collected at the beginning of the study period and at the end. It thus includes data from two big samples of compositions with the intention of examining verb production in EFL at two different testing moments and comparing two cohorts from the perspective of the variable proficiency level. We have chosen this methodology of study to follow the production of a high number of students longitudinally in order to explore quantitative verb type and token production unprejudiced.

Participants

A total of 199 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, from 4 schools, participated in the study. In fact, the essays of a higher number of students were collected, but they had to be discarded for either not being legible or because we had not data from the same student at two data collection times. In the first data collection moment, learners were in 4th grade of primary education, and were aged between 9 and 10. At this moment, learners had been exposed to approximately 419 hours of instruction in the FL. The second data collection moment took place four years later, students were in their 1st year of secondary education, grade 8, and were between 13-14 years of age. By this time, learners had received a total of 839 hours of instruction. Learners make up a homogeneous sample sharing L1, EFL teaching approach, educational background, and socio-economic status.

Instruments of data collection

Learners were asked to write a letter to a prospective host family in England. In the letter they had to write about themselves, their home, school, hometown, hobbies, and any other interesting thing about them. Learners had 30 minutes to accomplish the task. The same task was required at both testing moments. Data were collected in regular class sessions and notes, grammar books, dictionaries or other reference material were not allowed. No limitations, but for time constraints, were imposed on the learners.

Procedures and analysis

Data collection took place on one single sitting each time on a regular class. After essays were collected, we converted them into computer-readable form and saved them as .txt documents. Compositions were scrutinized for verbs. Single files were created for each student and data session in which all verbs used in the compositions were included. We lemmatized the verbs, so that different forms of the verbs were rendered in the base form, e.g. *be*, *was*, *is*, *being*, all are tallied as “be”, *write* *wrote*, *writing*, all appear as “write” in the data coding. Spelling mistakes were corrected when the verb was used accurately and could be recognized. Verb expressions consisting of more than one word, neutral or general verb plus collocate were coded as a single word, e.g. *go shopping* was coded as “goshopping”, *have dinner* as “havedinner”. Also, negation phrases, such as “I do not like” were also transformed into a single token, e.g., “like”.

When the identification of verb use was completed, we submitted the files to analysis with the Wordsmith Tools. Different analyses were performed: tallies for totals, means, frequencies, type/token ratios, verb type distribution and correlations between the different measures and students’ essay score using SSPS 19.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analyses show that in grade 4, learners produce a total of 60 verb types and 3456 verb tokens in total. Their mean of verb production per essay is 17.36 verb tokens. In grade 8, the figures increase considerably with a total of 165 verb types and 5533 verb tokens and 27.8 mean verb tokens per essay. Table I offers the results of descriptive statistics with means, maximum and minimum values of verb types and verb tokens and of the type/token ratio for the two grades tested.

The figures in Table 1 clearly show that as learners grow older and gain proficiency they produce more verb types and verb tokens as well. Consequently, the type/token ratio of older and more proficient learners is higher. This result is not new, since previous research already noted this. Our results come to verify this fact. In this sense, verb production can be used as a sign of linguistic development. From a pedagogical point of view, we agree with Marsden and David (2008) that verb production may be a proficiency descriptor in assessment. Likewise, teaching verbs and verbal structures might be a good way to increase our learners’ proficiency. However, we were not only interested in showing descriptive quantitative results; we also wanted to delve in the specific verbs produced and in the differences at the two proficiency levels.

“BE” is the most frequent verb in both grades, since it appears at least once in every essay. It represents almost 51% of total verb instances in the data in grade 4, and nearly 43% in grade 8. It is used to substitute the verb *have*, the expression *there is*, or the possessive *my*. Some examples of this are:

I'm one sister, I'm green eyes

There are 10 años, There are one sister, one father and one mother

I'm jovit: is play footbal, play baloncesto

When the learner lacks lexical knowledge of a specific verb or verb expression, he/she resorts to the available knowledge, which is the verb “BE”. It is a frequent strategy that learners make use of already available lexical knowledge, in this case overgeneralizing L2 knowledge to compensate for lack of lexical competence. As learners gain proficiency, they increase their lexical verbal repertoire, thus there is no need to overgeneralize L2 “BE” to contexts where it does not belong; this may explain decrease of “BE” from 4th to 8th grade data.

Other frequent verbs are “like”, “have”, “play”, “go”, and “live”, which occupy the following 5 top positions. It is interesting to learn not only about frequency but also about the distribution of verbs in the essays (cf. Table II), since this will provide with insightful information as concerns verb use by particular students. Additional data as to raw frequencies of verbs is also provided in the form of the percentage of subjects who use the particular verbs in their essays, at least once. Table II shows the ranking or frequency order of appearance of the 10 most frequent verb types in the two grades tested.

Table 1 - Descriptive statistics

Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
tokens_4	199	1	57	17.36	10.15
tokens_8	199	5	62	27.8	10.99
types_4	199	1	39	5	4.16
types_8	199	2	29	10.46	4.34
ttr_4	199	4.17	100	28.73	14.16
ttr_8	199	14.81	69.23	38.7	10.29

Table 2 - Frequency of verb types

No.	Grade 4	Grade 8
1	BE	BE
2	LIKE	HAVE
3	HAVE	GO
4	PLAY	LIKE
5	LIVE	PLAY
6	GO	LIVE
7	CAN	LOVE
8	SWIM	STUDY
9	READ	THERE
10	THERE	CALL

Table 3 - Distribution of verb types by student

	Grade 4	Grade 8
BE	100%	100%
HAVE	52.8%	84.3%
LIKE	57.3%	66%
GO	20%	70%
PLAY	46%	62.4%
LIVE	35.2%	78%
THERE	8%	20%
CAN	11.5%	10.4%
LOVE	6.5%	28.14%
SWIM	16.6%	9%
STUDY	10%	30%
READ	14%	11%
CALL	0%	16%

If we go down in the frequency list, we can observe more coincidences showing up. The use of the different verbs clearly shows the type of simple sentences students build: *like, have, like playing, I go in the weekend, like swimming, in Logroño there is*. These also reflect the topic of the composition in line with the observation made by Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg (1998) that the meaning expressed by the verb plays a significant role in the frequency of appearance of verbs. In particular, in our data we find some of the verbs Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg (1998) consider will appear early in learners productions because of their meaning, salience and frequency in input, e.g. *play, eat, go*. Thus, it is no surprise that given the essay topic in the present research, which involves the description of school, hometown, and hobbies, we find numerous instances of the existential *there is*, the state verbs such as *be, like, live, love*, or verbs that express activities or hobbies such as *play, go, swim or read*. It may be that the verb types are determined by the topic of the composition. Actually, the composition topic was selected because we assumed all learners would have something to write about. It is an easy topic relevant to their daily lives. This may have been decisive in verb choice. Table 3 displays the distribution with the percentage of learners who produce each particular verb.

These figures support previous findings that as proficiency increases, the number of verb tokens increases as well, as shown in Table I. We can observe that for the most frequent verbs at both testing times, more learners include them in their compositions in grade 8 than in grade 4. This result is very remarkable; because it evidences that there are more students that use actively more verbs. To put it differently, it is not only that more verb types (and tokens) are being used by older and more proficient learners, but also more learners in the sample use more verbs. In this sense, we can observe that specially for learners in grade 8, there is a homogeneous verb production of the majority of students who share verb profiles.

Among the most frequent verbs at both times, we find basic state verbs of an auxiliary or semi-auxiliary character such as *be* or *have*. These are essential verbs needed to express basic thoughts, especially those concerning identity. The frequent appearance of the existential *there is* can be traced back to the description topic required by the essay task.

Moreover, together with verbs that express physical activities, we can also observe the presence of verbs that are used frequently in different constructions. These are *like*, *play*, and *go*, basically. Frequent expressions spin around them, e.g. *I like reading*, *I like spaghetti*, *I like school*, *I like playing*, *I play football*, *I play games*, *I play with my friends*, *I play in a team*, *I go to school*, *I go to the shops*, *I go in the weekend*, *I go to the village*. The presence of these verbs or particular verb use does not decrease with time. It is interesting to mention at this moment, that many verbs appear as the direct objects of these verbs, as shown in the examples just above. These verbs are occupying a noun position, and in this sense are not indicative of syntactic development as such. With all, we still believe that the presence of more verb tokens and especially more verb types is a clear indicator of linguistic development, writing quality, and L2 proficiency. We will get to this later.

Apart from the verb use just described, we observe that action verbs occupy the most prominent positions, for example, *swim*, *read*, *study*, *dance*, *paint*, *ride*, *sing*, *write*, *run*, and so on. However, it is interesting to note that as learners grow older and more proficient, the frequency of state and action verbs and also of verbs of preference such as *like*, *want* and *love* decreases in favour of mental verbs such as *think*, which cannot be found in grade 4 but appears in position 14 in grade 8. Similarly, *remember* appears only once in grade 4, but 3 times in grade 8, *hope* (0 times in grade 4, 9 times in grade 8) *believe* (0 times in grade 4, 2 times in grade 8) *dream* (0 times in grade 4, 2 times in grade 8) *understand* (0 times in grade 4, 2 times in grade 8) *wish* (0 times in grade 4, 2 times in grade 8) are other examples of this type of verbs expressing mental states. This result is in line with previous studies (Anderson and Shirai 1994), which showed that state and action verbs are easier to learn and appear earlier in learners' productions, whereas mental verbs are more difficult to grasp and appear later in acquisition (Shatz, Wellman, Silber 1983). Moreover, this distribution of action and mental verbs might also reflect learners' worlds at the two moments of data collection: more physical at grade 4 and more intellectual 5 years later.

Table 4 - Morphologically complex verbs or verbal structures

Verb	Frequency	% essays
Go out	37	14.28% (30)
Have time	12	4.8% (10)
Go shopping	11	5.24 (11)
Be married	9	2.39% (5)
Be born	7	3.33% (7)
Come back	2	0.95% (2)
Get up	2	0.95% (2)
Be broken	2	0.95% (2)
Fall out	2	0.95% (2)
Wake up	1	0.47% (1)
Have breakfast/dinner/lunch	1	0.47% (1)
Get angry	1	0.47% (1)
Be able	1	0.47% (1)

The increase in the production of verb types evidences syntactic development, better idea organization, better structure of the discourse, and they provide with more specific information about the learners' messages. This idea is further supported if we attend to the semantic properties of the verbs at stake. In grade 4, most verbs and the most frequent ones express everyday activities learners practice as part of their daily routine, and most frequently have to do with physical activities: *play*, *swim*, *dance*, *eat*, *watch*, *run*, *ride*, *sing*, *jump*, *sleep*, or school activities: *read*, *study*, *draw*, *paint*, *write*. In grade 8 learners not only continue using these verbs, they also add new verbs of this type to their repertoire: *speak*, *listen*, *talk*, *learn*, *practice*, *smoke*, *fight*, *cycle*, just to mention some examples. Nevertheless, in grade 8, the verbs learners use most frequently express more complex actions or depict more complex situations detached from them and from a semantically more complex and abstract nature: *there is*, *call*, *travel*, *go out*, *meet*, *work*, *stay*, *think*, *tell*, *die*, *arrive*, *build*, *change*, *become*, *try*, *spend*, *rent*, *share*, *laugh*, and many more. These results clearly show that the universe of our learners is expanding, and they not only write about themselves and describe their surroundings, but they are also able to see beyond the self, and describe more events, places, and people outside. Verbs can thus be an indicator of this expanding self so frequently attested before through noun use.

From a morphological point of view, we can also note that in grade 4, learners produce monosyllabic verbs. There are very few instances of complex verbs in grade 4: *get up* which appears once in two essays and *have dinner* and *have lunch* which appear once in a single essay, respectively. However, there are frequent examples of complex structures and phrasal verbs in grade 8: *go out*, *go shopping* (appears as *shop* in grade 4), *have breakfast* (appears as *breakfast* in grade 4), *have dinner*, *come back*, *be married*, *be born*, *be able*, *wake up*, *get up*, *have time*, *get angry*, *be broken*, *fall out*. The data of these verbs appears in the following table:

We may draw some conclusions from this result which has to do with the difficulty that young learners of Spanish L1 have in learning and producing phrasal verbs or complex verbal structures which are absent from their L1. In particular, teachers might delay the explicit teaching of this type of verbs until learners are linguistically and cognitively mature to understand, learn, and, produce them, a point which clearly lies between 4th and 8th grade.

We cannot observe much L1 influence in our data to the extent that is has been observed in previous studies (Harley and King 1989, Zyzik 2009). It may be true that learners only use verbs which have an equivalent or direct translation in their L1, we can see this clearly in our data. Moreover, we can also see frequent instances of borrowings and relexifications or adaptations of L1 verbs to the grapho-phonemic rules of the L2: *soy* for *I am*, *mourir* for *die*, *enerve* (*enervar*) for *get on sb's nerves* or *gust* for *like*. However, learners use more Anglo-Saxon verbs than those of Latin origin, probably, because the former are easier, since they appear more frequently in the input they receive from the teacher and especially from the textbook (influence of instruction). As an example, we take the verbs *see* and *watch*, both of Anglo-Saxon origin, and which are quite frequent in the learners' essays, but *observe*, of Latin origin and with a direct L1 equivalent and cognate: *observar*, does not appear a single time. The following table shows the frequencies of the three verbs in the two grades tested.

Table 5 - Example of verbs of Anglo-Saxon and Latin origin

	Grade 4	Grade 8
See	1 (1 essays, 0.42%)	36 (29 essays, 13.81%)
Watch	20 (16 essays, 6.75%)	38 (32 essays, 15.23%)
Observe	0	0

In this sense, these results show that young learners are unable to benefit from the influence or presence of cognates, since they do not realize the similarities yet. Probably, it is their low L2 proficiency, underdeveloped L1 literacy, and specially their lack of metalinguistic awareness that limits their capacity to recognise cognates and similar words and to use them as a compensatory strategy. In grade 8, some examples of cognates or verbs of Latin origin start appearing: *practice* (18 times), *celebrate* (3 times), *discover* (3 times), *invite* (2 times), *contract* (1 time), *create* (1 time), *destroy* (1 time), *escape* (1 time), *entertain* (1 time), *organize* (1 time). Finally, we wanted to learn about the behaviour of general purpose verbs in the production of our learners. In particular, we tracked the presence of the general verbs: *do*, *make*, *go*, *put*. The following table offers the frequencies of these verbs for the two grades tested.

Table 6 - General purpose verbs

	Grade 4	Grade 8
Do	5 (5 essays, 2.1%)	53 (34 essays, 17%)
Make	2 (2 essays, 0.84%)	5 (5 essays, 2.1%)
Go	84 (43 essays, 18.14%)	367 (146 essays, 70%)
Put	0	4 (3 essays, 1.43%)

Our results concur with previous studies (Harley and King 1989, Kelly 1997) that low proficient learners make a frequent use of general purpose verbs. In our data, as learners move up grade, they make more use of this kind of verbs, probably, because they start producing more elaborated sentences and lack the knowledge of specific verbs. The need to communicate in the FL and their more developed lexical competence results in learners using more verbs. Nevertheless, learners may still not know some particular verbs and that is why they make use of more general purpose verbs. We can also think that general purpose verbs are more frequent in grade 8, simply because learners write longer compositions, and use more verbs. The high figures for *go* can be explained if we consider it as a verb whose use is frequent introducing many different structures. Moreover, most learners use the sentence: "I go to SCHOOL'S NAME school" in their essays.

As we have mentioned briefly above, verb use indicates syntactic development and is a sign of L2 proficiency and writing quality. More verb types and verb tokens are produced as learners move up grade and get more proficient. This increase in verb production is accompanied by an increase in essay length and in essay scoreⁱⁱ. The results of these statistical analyses are presented in Table VII. Furthermore, the number of verb types and verb tokens correlates significantly with essay length and essay score, which are also significantly related. This means

that the more verb types and tokens in a composition, the higher the score of the composition. This result contributes to answering in positive the queries posited by Marsden and David (2008) of whether verbs can be considered to be indicative of more proficient production and of whether verbs should be emphasized in teaching since they make the language of learners more proficient-like. Similarly, the longer the essay, the higher the score it will get. Table VIII shows the magnitude of the correlations.

Table 7 - Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
score_4	199	28	89	60.64	10.75
score_8	199	35	90	73.42	9.24
Total_words_4	199	21	282	105.6	56.09
Total_words_8	199	61	419	165.03	62.83

Table 8 - Correlations

Spearman rho coefficient	Total_words_4	Verb_types_4	Verb tokens_4	Total_words_8	Verb_types_8	Verb tokens_8
score_4	.568**	.570**	.612**			
score_8				.587**	.528**	.604**

** significant at p < .001

CONCLUSION

The conclusions to the present five-year longitudinal research study can be structured along several axes. First and foremost, results point to verb production as a sign of linguistic development in EFL, and this within three basic areas/ aspects/ constructs: a) L2 proficiency, b) syntactic and discursive development and c) writing quality. This is far from a straightforward conclusion, and one of the first attempts to track verb production along five years with very young EFL learners, to describe a verb profile for this student population, and to explore the role they play in writing quality. The pedagogical implications of these findings are relevant as concerns the amount and type of verb teaching in the line that Marsden and David (2008) proposed.

Second, school instruction tends to homogenise learners' verb type production leaving little room to students' to show their own voice in their writings. In line with this, verb production faithfully reflects learners' psycho-cognitive development along these five years. This places verbs together with nouns as a tool to explore young learners' developing worlds. Third, young and low proficient learners are unable to recognize cognates and thus cannot benefit from them in EFL verb production. It seems that verb frequency is more determinant than cognate status for learners at these ages and proficiency levels. Very much in line with the previous conclusion, our fourth claim from the present results is that morphological complex verbs, especially phrasal verbs only appear later in acquisition, despite their frequency and semantic simplicity. Finally, fifth, the production of general purpose verbs increases with proficiency and age. Learners' higher willingness to communicate and lack of knowledge of specific verbs may explain this.

This is a local study that reflects global concerns and supports previous research with other L1 groups in other contexts. Our description of verb types and verb tokens allows for the delineation of a verb use profile of Spanish EFL learners along their language development. Furthermore, we venture some possible reasons for the production of particular verb types: lexical and linguistic competence, need to communicate, cognitive development. No claim is made to exhaustiveness and further studies are called on that explore verb production in EFL learners and that relate verb use to foreign language teaching in the classroom.

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ⁱ Nevertheless, some years ago, researchers working with L1 development questioned the nouns first hypothesis on the basis of evidence from other non-Indo-European languages (Tardif, Shatz, Naigles 1997, Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg 1998). The saliency of verbs in the input of some languages accounts for this fact.

ⁱⁱ Compositions were submitted to scoring with the ESL Profile (Jacobs et al. 1981). Essay score results are tentative and preliminary, since for grade 8 compositions only a single scorer did the rating.