# AN ANALYSIS OF THE VOCABULARY USED IN E-MAILS BY EFL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES[1]

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**Resumen**

El objetivo principal de este artículo es trazar el perfil de vocabulario utilizado por dieciséis aprendices de inglés españoles de educación secundaria con dificultades de aprendizaje para describir a chicos y chicas de su misma edad y fiestas tradicionales del Reino Unido a partir de la información obtenida en un intercambio de e-mails con hablantes nativos de su misma edad basado en el e-mail tándem. Teniendo en cuenta estos textos, se pretende medir (i) el número y las clases de palabras utilizadas por los participantes y (ii) comprobar la frecuencia de las palabras que los informantes son capaces de producir en inglés. Los textos fueron editados en formato electrónico y examinados con el analizador de vocabulario *Range*. Los resultados indican que (i) los sustantivos y los verbos son las categorías léxicas más utilizadas por los estudiantes; (ii) dichas palabras están dentro de banda de las 1000 más frecuentes del inglés.

**Palabras clave***:* e-mail tándem, dificultades de aprendizaje, ocurrencias, tipos, frecuencia

**Abstract**

This paper aims at tracing the vocabulary profiles used by sixteen secondary school Spanish students with learning difficulties to describe people their same age and traditional festivals thanks to an e-mail tandem exchange with learners of Spanish as a foreign language their same age, belonging to a secondary school in the UK. Taking account of these texts, we will also aim to (i) identify the number and lexical category of the words used by the participants, and (ii) check the frequency of the words informants are able to produce. All the texts were digitalised and analysed by means of *Range Tools*. Our results indicate that (i) nouns and verbs are the most frequent lexical categories used by learners, and (ii) these words belong to the most frequent 1,000 words of English.

**Keywords:** e-mail tandem, learning difficulties, tokens, types, frequency

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, e-mail writing has become one of the main ways for personal and professional communication, helping millions of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds keep in touch by means of this asynchronous digital device. As opposed to letter writing which follows the typical rules of written communication; e.g.: brevity, adequate style (formal or informal), greetings and closings (Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba 2007b: 506), e-mail messages are characterized by a distinctive combination of oral and written language (Crystal 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasonforth 2001; Danet 2002; Chi-Fen 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007).

The use of e-mails as a pedagogical tool in foreign language learning has been discussed by scholars working on the field of language teaching from the 1990s (Brammerts and Little 1996; Belisle 1996; Little 1998; Nagel 1999; Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasonforth 2001; Danet 2002; Chi-Fen 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). Thus, Belisle (1996) points out the advantages of using this asynchronous tool since it allows learners to keep in touch not only with the teacher but also with each other.

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At the same time, it promotes collaborative learning among students with different mother tongues, favouring the development of writing skills as well as coming closer to the target language community by contacting native speakers. On the other hand, this collaborative work also helps reflect on one's strengths and weaknesses in order to overcome them with the partner's help. Besides, Gonglewski *et al.* (2001) support that the use of e-mails in the foreign language classroom widens the time needed when writing in a foreign language since students do not need to be at a determined time in a particular room to contact the native speakers but they can write their e-mails at home or anywhere providing they have access to the internet, which allows them to have more time to read and write the messages. Furthermore, the interaction with people from different countries and nationalities allows learners to contrast different cultural experiences in order to be aware of the sense of otherness.

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

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

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

E-mail tandem helps equality between both tandem partners because they must help each other in order to achieve the learning goals they have previously set. To achieve these goals, tandem partners should use both their native language and the target language in each message and the ideal situation is when they write half of the message in each language. Using both languages also implies that the method has a lot to do with *learning from the partner's model*, which has five further implications. Firstly, *learning from a partner's*

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*clarifications, explanations and information* (Brammerts and Calvert 2003: 52). Learning is also achieved by *dialogue*. The dialogue will benefit from the fact that both learners are interested in the language and culture of their partners, have previous knowledge of it and can learn from comparisons. Secondly, *learning forms of utterance and behaviour from a partner* which "involves […] productive [language] use by learners" (2003: 52). This process has a lot in common with intercultural learning because there is not only the need to be grammatically and phonologically competent in the L2, but also to know the context and the cultural connotations that may be implied in the words that are uttered or written. The third implication when learning from the partner is *learning from the partner's corrections*, as partners "must state clearly what should be corrected in what way and at what time, and if necessary, give hints to their partner" (2003: 53).

This approach to language learning has three main goals: ability to communicate in the target language, ability to adapt and behave appropriately in a cultural environment which is not their own (intercultural communication), and ability to self-reflection and mutual collaboration with the tandem partner. Finally, the input provided by the native speaker in every e-mail will become a key element to acquiring new vocabulary in the target language, as it will be shown in the third section of this paper.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Goals

The aim of this study is to trace the vocabulary profiles used by last grade secondary school students with learning difficulties to describe people their same age and traditional festivals in England thanks to an e-mail tandem exchange with learners of Spanish as a foreign language their same age belonging to a secondary school in the UK. Taking account of these texts, we will also aim to (i) identify the number and lexical category of the words used by the participants, and (ii) check the frequency of the words informants are able to produce.

### 2.2. Participants

This study is based on a corpus of 16 e-mails written by Spanish EFL in their last year of Secondary Education. The research was carried out in a school in Asturias (North of Spain) and it is homogenous in the sense that all the informants are the same age (17-18) and belong to the same socio-cultural background. Besides, they share the same mother tongue, and have remarkable learning difficulties (Miranda, Vidal and Soriano 2000), which is why they are included in a special programme called *Diversificación Curricular*. "*Diversificación Curricular*" groups are formed by students who have significant learning difficulties and/or a lack of motivation towards formal learning. Some of them might also have behavioural or psychological problems. For these reasons, the curriculum should be adapted to their needs, so that they can achieve the necessary goals and competencies to achieve their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). This programme is recommended to be developed over the last two years of secondary education, i.e. 3rd and 4th Grade, though it is possible to include students during its second year of implementation.

In order to promote students' motivation the methodology used implies two main aspects. On the one hand, they work in small groups which cannot be bigger than fifteen pupils on three main areas: Sociolinguistics (i.e. Spanish and History) and Sciences and Technology (i.e. Maths, Biology and Chemistry) and a foreign language (English). As far as the foreign language is concerned, it should be taught according to a communicative approach to help the students involved acquire the basic competences to use the L2 according to listening, spoken interaction, writing, reading and speaking as suggested in the *Common*

*European Framework* (2001). Students are exposed to the target language for three hours during the first year of the programme and for two hours during the second year. The rest of the subjects (i.e. P.E., Religion, Arts and Crafts and IT), are learnt with the rest of their classmates in groups which should not be bigger than thirty students. This study analyses the work done by two different groups of students at 4th Grade during two consecutive academic years following the methodological approach which will be shown in the next section.

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

## 2.3. Procedures and instruments

In order to find a partner school, the Tandem Server at the Ruhr Universität in Bochum (tandem@slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de) was contacted. According to the age of the participants and the aims of both schools regarding foreign language teaching and learning, the school was paired up with a private boarding school located in West Sussex (UK). Before the students began with the exchange of e-mails, the teachers who were involved in the project established an initial contact to decide on how to pair the students and organize the tasks to be developed. The pairings were made at random, according to three main criteria. First, the participants were all 16-18 years old which is supposed to imply that they share common hobbies and interests, which is really important for a successful e-mail tandem experience (Gläsmann and Calvert 2001). Besides, all the informants fulfil three requirements to facilitate tandem language learning since they can understand the text written by their tandem partners whenever they use their mother tongue, they are able to consider them as examples which are useful to communicate in the target language and they can ask their partners about aspects which may remain unclear (Brammerts and Kleppin 2003: 158). Finally, being e-mail tandem an asynchronous communication, each member of the pair may check unknown vocabulary by looking it up in a dictionary or trying to find more information about a particular topic by using other resources (e.g. the internet).

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

Topics were selected following the guidelines given for face-to-face tandem (Brammerts and Calvert 2003) which were adapted to e-mail tandem by Gläsmann and Calvert (2001). These topics should promote authentic communication that is why they should be open so that each participant can make use some of their knowledge derived from previous experience, ideas or opinions. Besides, topics should motivate learners to develop their work in tandem, and they should be asked to give their views on possible topics to be discussed

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during their e-mail tandem exchange in order to achieve their learning outcomes. Taking account of these criteria, five main activities have been suggested to be developed by means of e-mail tandem i.e. "Sharing personal information; exchanging information; eliciting and discussing points of view; being creative together, and talking about language and communication" (Brammerts and Calvert, 2003: 58-59).

*Sharing personal information activities* aim at discovering "their partner's personality as well as their need and desire to talk about themselves" (2003: 58). These topics are developed in the first e-mail students exchange at the beginning of their work in tandem.

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

*Table I. Tasks*

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

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

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

Taking account of the main characteristics and principles of e-mail tandem, which have been presented in the introduction and the objectives of the study pointed out in section 2.1., at the end of the first term students were asked to e-mail the teacher according to the following command: *Describe your e-mail tándem and talk about festivals in England*. The text had to be 6 to 10 lines long and include a personal description of the partner and information about festivals in England. Four students did not answer anything so they were excluded from the sample, it being reduced to 12 informants.

All the texts written by the participants were digitalised, checked regarding spelling and grammar to avoid the electronic count on words which are not present in Contemporary English Dictionaries. All the texts were analysed with *Range* and *Frequency* which belong to *Range Tools* (http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx) in order to test the hypotheses which were mentioned in the previous section of this paper, and compare the results with previous research on vocabulary in written compositions in English carried out with primary students from La Rioja (Agustín Llach and Barreras Gómez 2007, Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba 2007a and 2008, Ojeda Alba 2010) since Asturias and La Rioja share some characteristics regarding socio-cultural origin of the students involved, being monolingual communities where English language teaching is being promoted by means of several innovative projects e.g.: Bilingual Sections.

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## 3. Results

Following Nation (2001: 7), the term *type* is used as a class of linguistic item, *token* as examples of occurrences of a type, and *Type-Token Ratio* as "a measure of the ratio of different words to the total number of words in a text" (Richards and Schmitt 2002: 567).

Our data show that students produced a total of 615 word tokens and 180 word types. The mean of word tokens per e-mail was 51.25 whereas the mean for word types was 15. Finally, the average type-token ratio per e-mail was 33.13.

As regards the lexical category of the content words used by the participants i.e. the total number of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs they use in their e-mail exchanges (Greenbaum and Quirk 1993), the data confirm that nouns and verbs are the most frequent lexical categories used by this group of students. This result is similar to some research carried out with primary students in La Rioja by analysing their written compositions in English (Agustín Llach and Barreras Gómez, 2007; Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba 2007a and 2008; Ojeda Alba 2010).

According to *Frequency*, a tool which belongs to *Range* and is aimed at "processing vocabulary to provide word frequency, together with their percentage and cumulative percent in the corpus of e-mails analysed" (http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx) , nouns are the most frequent word token used by the students involved in this study. As shown in table II, these types of words represent 58% of the total number of tokens used in the e-mail tandem exchange. As far as tandem partner's descriptions are concerned, we can classify the words used by students in three different semantic fields: family, free time/hobbies and personal information. The word *family* appears four times in the corpus being word tokens which refer to family members also quite frequently used since we find occurrences of *brother* (6)[2], *brothers* (3), sisters (3), sister (2), *father* (2), and *mother* (2). Free time and hobbies are also present in the corpus and it can be subdivided in three semantic fields: *friends* (7), music (4), and sports (3). Among the tokens related to these semantic fields, *football* (9) is the most frequent noun used by students, followed by tennis (3) and basketball (2). Regarding personal information we can distinguish three main groups: general terms, such as *name* (6) or *people* (6); word tokens referring to age: *years* (7) together with the adjective *old*, and, finally, terms about physical description: *eyes* (6) and *hair* (4) usually pre-modified by two adjectives, *brown* (7) and *blue* (2). Apart from these two examples and the use of the term *favourite* (5) to refer to hobbies, no more instances of adjectives are found in the most frequent fifty content words in the corpus. However, there are some references to adjectives relating to character e.g.: *friendly* (1), *funny* (1), lazy (1), sociable (1) or talkative (1) in the e-mails analysed. These data resemble the results found in several studies on primary EFL students written compositions when writing to a British family they were supposed to live with for a certain period of time (Agustín Llach and Barreras Gómez 2007, Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba 2007a and 2008, Ojeda Alba 2010). These similarities seem to show that there are not big differences among these two groups of students despite the fact that students with learning difficulties are at the end of their formal instruction and their exposure to the target language has been longer. However, the fact that they have learning difficulties may influence the amount of words they are able to process and remember in the target language. It is also true that teenagers, as well as younger children, consider friendship as something very important so that is why they focus on tokens which refer to the activities their tandem partners do in their spare time.

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[2] The bracketed number indicates the number of occurrences of each word token in the corpus.

As far as traditional festivals in the UK are concerned we find two word tokens referring to Halloween (*Halloween* and *sweets*) which shows that the participants are not familiarised with Guy Fawkes' Night since no reference is mentioned in their texts. This could be explained according to two main reasons. On the one hand, it has been checked that most of their tandem partners have provided them with very limited or no information at all on this topic, and those who have received it prefer to omit it since they show no interest in it.

Lexical verbs represent 28% of the 50 most frequent word tokens in the corpus. The most common verb used is *to be* in its singular form (is [29]). *Has* (18) appears immediately afterwards closely followed by *likes* (12) which highlights that students focused mainly on possession and preferences when describing their tandem partners. This hypothesis is reinforced since verbs like *to go* is quite common in the e-mails analysed either in its *–ing* form [*going* (8)] or in the simple present third person singular [*goes* (2)], as well as *plays* (6).

Adverbs are scarcely used by the informants since only two terms related to this lexical category (*very* and *lot*) are found in the corpus. This lack of adverbs could be explained on the fact that these words usually modify adjectives (Greenbaum y Quirk, 1993: 147-152) and, as it was mentioned above, adjectives are not very frequent in the corpus of e-mails analysed in this study.

*Table II. List of the 50 most frequent words*

| Word Type | Rank | Frequency | Percentage | Cumulative Percent |
|-----------|------|-----------|------------|--------------------|
| IS | 1 | 29 | 4.72 | 22.44 |
| HAS | 2 | 18 | 2.93 | 28.94 |
| LIKES | 3 | 12 | 1.95 | 36.42 |
| GOT | 4 | 11 | 1.79 | 40.00 |
| FOOTBALL | 5 | 9 | 1.46 | 43.25 |
| GOING | 6 | 8 | 1.30 | 48.78 |
| OLD | 7 | 8 | 1.30 | 50.08 |
| ARE | 8 | 7 | 1.14 | 51.22 |
| BROWN | 9 | 7 | 1.14 | 52.36 |
| FRIENDS | 10 | 7 | 1.14 | 53.50 |
| YEARS | 11 | 7 | 1.14 | 55.77 |
| BROTHER | 12 | 6 | 0.98 | 56.75 |
| EYES | 13 | 6 | 0.98 | 57.72 |
| LIVES | 14 | 6 | 0.98 | 58.70 |
| NAME | 15 | 6 | 0.98 | 59.67 |
| PEOPLE | 16 | 6 | 0.98 | 60.65 |
| PLAYS | 17 | 6 | 0.98 | 61.63 |
| FAVOURITE | 18 | 5 | 0.81 | 62.44 |
| VERY | 19 | 5 | 0.81 | 65.69 |
| FAMILY | 20 | 4 | 0.65 | 66.99 |
| HAIR | 21 | 4 | 0.65 | 67.64 |
| MUSIC | 22 | 4 | 0.65 | 68.29 |
| ASKED | 23 | 3 | 0.49 | 69.43 |
| BROTHERS | 24 | 3 | 0.49 | 69.92 |
| E-TANDEM | 25 | 3 | 0.49 | 70.41 |
| HOBBIES | 26 | 3 | 0.49 | 70.89 |
| LETTER | 27 | 3 | 0.49 | 71.38 |
| PARTNER | 28 | 3 | 0.49 | 71.87 |
| PETS | 29 | 3 | 0.49 | 72.36 |
| SISTERS | 30 | 3 | 0.49 | 72.85 |
| SPEAKS | 31 | 3 | 0.49 | 73.33 |
| SPORTS | 32 | 3 | 0.49 | 73.82 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TENNIS | 33 | 3 | 0.49 | 74.31 |
| BASKETBALL | 34 | 2 | 0.33 | 75.45 |
| BLUE | 35 | 2 | 0.33 | 75.77 |
| CHILDREN | 36 | 2 | 0.33 | 76.10 |
| DANCING | 37 | 2 | 0.33 | 76.42 |
| DOG | 38 | 2 | 0.33 | 76.75 |
| FATHER | 39 | 2 | 0.33 | 77.07 |
| FISH | 40 | 2 | 0.33 | 77.40 |
| GIVE | 41 | 2 | 0.33 | 78.05 |
| GOES | 42 | 2 | 0.33 | 78.37 |
| HALLOWEEN | 43 | 2 | 0.33 | 78.70 |
| LAST | 44 | 2 | 0.33 | 79.02 |
| LOT | 45 | 2 | 0.33 | 79.35 |
| MOTHER | 46 | 2 | 0.33 | 79.67 |
| SHOPPING | 47 | 2 | 0.33 | 80.33 |
| SISTER | 48 | 2 | 0.33 | 80.65 |
| SPAIN | 49 | 2 | 0.33 | 81.30 |
| SWEETS | 50 | 2 | 0.33 | 81.63 |

The e-mails were also analysed by means of *Range* to provide a range or distribution figure (how many texts the word occurs in), a headword frequency figure (the total number of times the actual headword type appears in all the texts), a family frequency figure (the total number of times the word and its family members occur in all the texts), and a frequency figure for each of the texts the word occurs in. This electronic tool also creates word lists based on frequency and range, and compares a text against vocabulary lists to see what words in the text are and are not in the lists, and to see what percentage of the items in the text are covered by the lists. The programme provides three baseword lists. The first (*BASEWRD1*) includes the most frequent 1000 words of English. The second (*BASEWRD2*) includes the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, and the third (*BASEWRD3*) includes words not in the first 2000 words of English but which are frequent in upper secondary school and university texts from a wide range of subjects. All of these base lists include the base forms of words and derived forms. The first 1000 words, thus, consists of around 4000 forms or types. The sources of these lists are *A General Service List of English Words* by Michael West (Longman, London 1953) for the first 2000 words, and *The Academic Word List* by Coxhead (1998, 2000) containing 570 word families.

As it is shown in table III, the informants employ a total number of 615 tokens and 180 different types which belong to 130 different families. Most of the these tokens (86.02%) are part of word list one, i.e. the most frequent 1,000 words of English, whereas 7.48% are included in word list two, and 1.14% in word list three. The fact that the percentage of types in word lists two and three (11.67% and 2.78%, respectively) are higher than those of tokens is outstanding, implying that those informants who use them do not repeat words, but employ different terms belonging to these lists. Finally, the results show a reduced number of word tokens (see table IV) which are not included in any of the word lists but which are frequent English words being relevant to describe people, hobbies and *Halloween* and *Guy Fawkes' Night*.

*Table III. Range Results*

| WORD LIST | TOKENS/% | TYPES/% | FAMILIES |
|---|---|---|---|
| one | 529/86.02 | 130/72.22 | 105 |
| two | 46/ 7.48 | 21/11.67 | 20 |
| three | 7/ 1.14 | 5/ 2.78 | 5 |
| not in the lists | 33/ 5.37 | 24/13.33 | ????? |
| Total | 615 | 180 | 130 |

*Table IV. Words not included in any list*

| TYPE | RANGE | FREQ |
|------|-------|------|
| E-TANDEM | 1 | 3 |
| HOBBIES | 1 | 3 |
| TENNIS | 1 | 3 |
| BASKETBALL | 1 | 2 |
| HALLOWEEN | 1 | 2 |
| SPAIN | 1 | 2 |
| BEACH | 1 | 1 |
| BONFIRE | 1 | 1 |
| BOYFRIEND | 1 | 1 |
| CINEMA | 1 | 1 |
| COSTUMES | 1 | 1 |
| DISCOS | 1 | 1 |
| ENGLAND | 1 | 1 |
| FESTIVAL | 1 | 1 |
| HOBBY | 1 | 1 |
| PARLIAMENT | 1 | 1 |
| SOCIABLE | 1 | 1 |
| STEP-FATHER | 1 | 1 |
| SURFING | 1 | 1 |
| TALKATIVE | 1 | 1 |
| TELEVISION | 1 | 1 |
| WEIRD | 1 | 1 |

Finally, the *stop list* tool was applied to the e-mails to count content words and to exclude function words from all totals. The findings (see table V) show that the average token/type ratio per e-mail is higher in at level 1 when compared to levels two and three. Thus, 59.02% of the types the informants used in their texts are included in the most frequent 1000 words of English, 17.21% represents the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, and 4.10% are words not in the first 2000 words of English. The fact that eleven students (91.67%) used at least one token belonging to this level is outstanding, but seven students (41.67%) are able to use one type included in word list number 3. The rate of types which are not included in any of the three word lists (19.67%) is slightly higher than the one shown in table III since, as it was mentioned when referring to the results obtained with *Frequency*, students used several tokens to describe their tandem partners which are included in the lexicon but excluded from these lists (see table IV). Furthermore, the *stop list* tool also discards verbs which are frequently used by students in their e-mails e.g.: *is/are*, *have/has* y *like/likes* (see table I) which, on the one hand, implies that the total number of tokens is reduced from 615 to 251, and the overall rate of words not included in the most frequent 1000 words of English, the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, and the words not included in the first 2000 words of English increases moderately.

These data, as with those obtained when analysing the lexical category of the words used by the participants, resemble the results obtained by Agustín Llach and Barreras Gómez (2007), Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2007a and 2008) and Ojeda Alba (2010) since most of the words are included in the most frequent 1000 words of English being the token/type ratio slightly higher regarding the 2nd 1000 most frequent words, in the group of secondary students analysed in this study.

*Table V. Stop list Range Results*

| WORD LIST | TOKENS/% | TYPES/% | FAMILIES |
|-----------|----------|---------|----------|
| one | 165/65.74 | 72/59.02 | 60 |
| two | 46/18.33 | 21/17.21 | 20 |
| three | 7/ 2.79 | 5/ 4.10 | 5 |
| not in the lists | 33/13.15 | 24/19.67 | ????? |
| Total | 251 | 122 | 85 |

## 4. Conclusion

The data presented in this paper show that nouns and verbs are the lexical categories which are most frequently used by this group of secondary students with learning difficulties to describe their e-mail tandem partners. Nouns, which are the most frequent word tokens used by students, can be classified according to three different semantic fields: family, free time/hobbies and personal information. Regarding family, students refer to their closest relatives (mother, father, brother and sister). Free time/hobbies can be subdivided into: friends, sports, and music whereas personal information includes: name, age and physical description. The most common verb used is *to be* followed by verbs which refer to possession (e.g. have), preferences (e.g. like) and movement (e.g. go). The findings also show that adjectives and adverbs are scarcely used in this sample.

These results agree with those obtained by Agustín Llach and Barreras Gómez (2007), Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2007a and 2008), Ojeda Alba (2010) when analysing primary students' written compositions in English, which may imply that more time of exposure to foreign language learning does not necessarily mean that the informants are able to use more adjectives or adverbs in their e-mail communication. Another reason to justify the fact that adjectives and adverbs are rarely present in the e-mails analysed is the specific characteristics of e-mail writing which combine features from oral and written language. (Crystal, 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasonforth 2001; Danet 2002; Chi-Fen 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), being the oral features emphasized in informal contexts such as the e-mail exchange between teenagers who try to avoid using a formal discourse which may include long descriptions, and, therefore, more adjectives and adverbs as pre-modifiers.

On the other hand, most of the tokens the informants employ belong to the most frequent 1,000 words of English, which concurs with the results achieved by primary students. However, the percentage of types and tokens in word lists two and three is slightly higher in the students analysed in this study which seems to show that learning difficulties are not a severe obstacle to improving and widening students' vocabulary profile.

Regarding traditional festivals in the UK we find few instances referring to Halloween and no reference to Guy Fawkes' Night, which seems to prove that students were not interested in learning this kind of vocabulary and they omit any reference to both festivals.

As a conclusion, this study points out that students with learning difficulties can acquire vocabulary to describe their tandem partners using e-mail tandem to communicate with native speakers of the target language. However, this is a preliminary analysis, and further research needs to be carried out to compare these data with the results obtained by a group of EFL students without learning difficulties in their last year of Secondary Education from the same school, who also used an approach based on e-mail tandem in their instruction, to test if these second group obtains better results according to lexical category, number of types and tokens and level of frequency of the words used (level 1, 2 or 3) when compared to their "*Diversificación Curricular*" partners or if, contrariwise, the results are quite similar as happens with *"Diversificación Curricular"* students and primary students from La Rioja. Finally, some research could be conducted to test whether there are any sex-based differences in both groups of informants.

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