Email writing by young language learners: Response characteristics and implications

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Characteristics of email writing

A hybrid genre that contains characteristics of both oral and written communication. (Fotos, 2004)

Typical characteristics:
- ✓ Uses simplified speech-like register and simple vocabulary
- ✓ Sentences may be speech-like
- ✓ Subject and verb parts sometimes omitted

- ✓ Has an authentic audience
- ✓ Typically involves a communicative purpose for writing

Pedagogical benefits of email task

Email task can be used in the classroom to:

✓ Develop learners' written communicative skills

✓ Provide opportunities for interpersonal interactions

✓ Allow meaning-based discourse to occur

✓ Reduce student anxiety

✓ Enable individualized feedback

✓ Provide authentic learning contexts
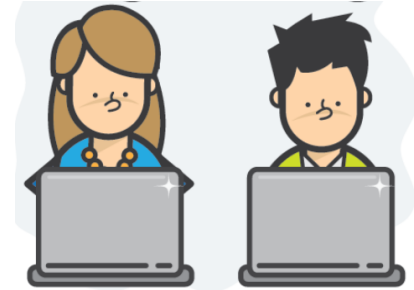
Motivation of the study

1. Previous research on email writing task focuses mostly on adult learners' email writing (Butler, 2012; Chen, 2015; Codina-Espurz & Salazar-Campillo, 2019).
2. **Gap in the literature**: Little research has examined the use of email writing task for teaching writing skills and assessing young language learners' writing abilities (So et al, 2015).

Research Questions

1. Are young learners' email writing abilities related to their English language proficiency?
2. How do young learners' email writing responses differ across proficiency levels?
3. How do teachers perceive the usefulness of email task for teaching and assessing young learners' writing skills?

Participants

	The Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	All
Grade 7	92	47	15	154
Grade 8	33	20	17	70
Total	125	67	32	224

Mean age: 12.7 yrs
Gender:
- 100 girls
- 90 boys
- 34 missing data

Home language:
- Dutch: 81
- Danish: 36
- Finnish: 12
- Missing data: 95

The email writing task

Instructions

- Respond to Chris' email about the chess club

- Answer Chris' questions

- 15 minutes to write

- Check grammar, spelling, and punctuation

Respond to Chris' email. In your response, answer all questions in Chris' email. You have about **15 minutes** to read the email and write your response. Write in complete sentences. When you are finished, check your writing for grammar, spelling and punctuation. Then click **Next**.

Chris' email message:
From: Chris
Sent: April 10, 11:30 A.M.
To: You
Subject: Chess Club

Hi,

We have been talking about starting a chess club at school. I wanted to get your opinion about how we should do it.

How often should we meet? Why?

Where should we meet? Why?

Finally, we need to advertise our new chess club to attract a lot of members. What do you think is the best way to do this?

Thanks for helping me with this!
Chris

Your response:
From: You
To: Chris
Subject: RE: Chess Club

Undo   Cut   Paste   Copy   Words: 0

Email task scoring rubric

Score	Development and Language Use Descriptors
4	A typical response at this level is characterized by the following: • responds to all questions in the e-mail, directly or indirectly • is coherent • shows lexical variation appropriate for the task • displays a varied sentence structure appropriate for the task • may contain minor errors but they do not interfere with meaning
3	A typical response at this level is characterized by the following: • responds to most of the questions in the e-mail, directly or indirectly • is generally coherent • shows some lexical variation appropriate for the task • may display variation in sentence structure appropriate for the task • may contain some errors that occasionally interfere with meaning
2	A typical response at this level is characterized by the following: • responds to some questions in the e-mail • may be incoherent at times • shows little lexical variation (e.g., vocabulary is simple and repetitive), or often uses vocabulary incorrectly • may show little control of sentence structures • may contain errors that frequently interfere with meaning
1	A typical response at this level is characterized by the following: • responds minimally to questions in the e-mail • is generally incoherent • displays limited vocabulary that may be used incorrectly • uses mostly incorrect sentence structures • displays many errors that seriously interfere with meaning
0	Only copies words from the prompt, rejects the prompt, is completely off topic, consists of keystroke characters, is written in a foreign language, or is blank

Email writing performance features evaluated

| Feature	Definition	Derived from
Writing fluency	Total number of words	e-rater®
Lexical diversity	Unique word types	e-rater®
Mechanics	Errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc.	e-rater®
Lexicogrammar	Accuracy and diversity of vocabulary and grammar (1-4 point scale)	Human
Content	Completeness of responses to the questions in the email (1-4 point scale)	Human

Data collection

- Email task administered by classroom teachers
- Students took TOEFL Junior Standard Test to measure their English language proficiency
- 7 teachers participated in focus group or one-on-one interviews (2 Danish, 2 Finnish, 3 Dutch)

TOEFL Junior ® Standard Test

Sections	Scale Scores
Listening Comprehension	200–300
Language Form and Meaning	200–300
Reading Comprehension	200–300
Total Score	**600–900**

TOEFL Junior® Standard Test

Overall Score Level	Total Scale Score	Overall Performance Descriptor	CEFR Profile
5 Superior	845–900	Consistently demonstrates comprehension of complex written and spoken materials, drawing on knowledge of complex language structures and vocabulary.	B2 for all sections
4 Accomplished	785–840	Often demonstrates comprehension of complex written and spoken materials, drawing on knowledge of complex language structures and vocabulary.	B1 for all sections
3 Expanding	730–780	Demonstrates comprehension of some complex written and spoken materials and most basic materials, drawing on knowledge of basic language structures and vocabulary.	Mostly B1 for all sections, but occasionally A2
2 Progressing	655–725	Occasionally demonstrates comprehension of basic written and spoken materials, drawing on knowledge of basic language structures and vocabulary.	Mostly A2 for all sections, but occasionally A1 for Reading and Listening
1 Emerging	600–650	Can comprehend some very basic written and spoken texts, drawing on knowledge of basic language structures and vocabulary, but needs to further develop these language skills and comprehension abilities.	Mostly A1 for Listening and Reading; mostly A2 for Language, Form and Meaning

TOEFL Junior Standard Test Overall Score Level
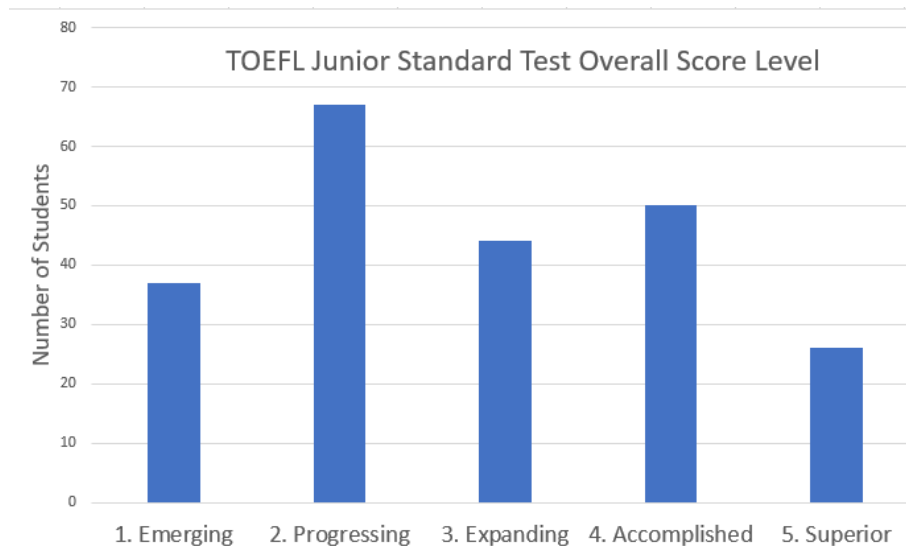
Results

RQ1: Correlations between email task scores and TOEFL Junior Standard test scores

| TOEFL Junior Standard Score	Email task score
Listening comprehension	.64**
Language form and meaning	.68**
Reading comprehension	.61**
TOEFL Junior Standard Total Score	.69**

RQ2: Task score difference across proficiency levels

Proficiency Level	*n*	Writing task score	
		Mean	*S.D.*
Level 1. Emerging	37	1.14	0.71
Level 2. Progressing	67	1.90	0.97
Level 3. Expanding	44	2.75	1.01
Level 4. Accomplished	50	3.18	0.72
Level 5. Superior	26	3.46	0.64

Writing Fluency
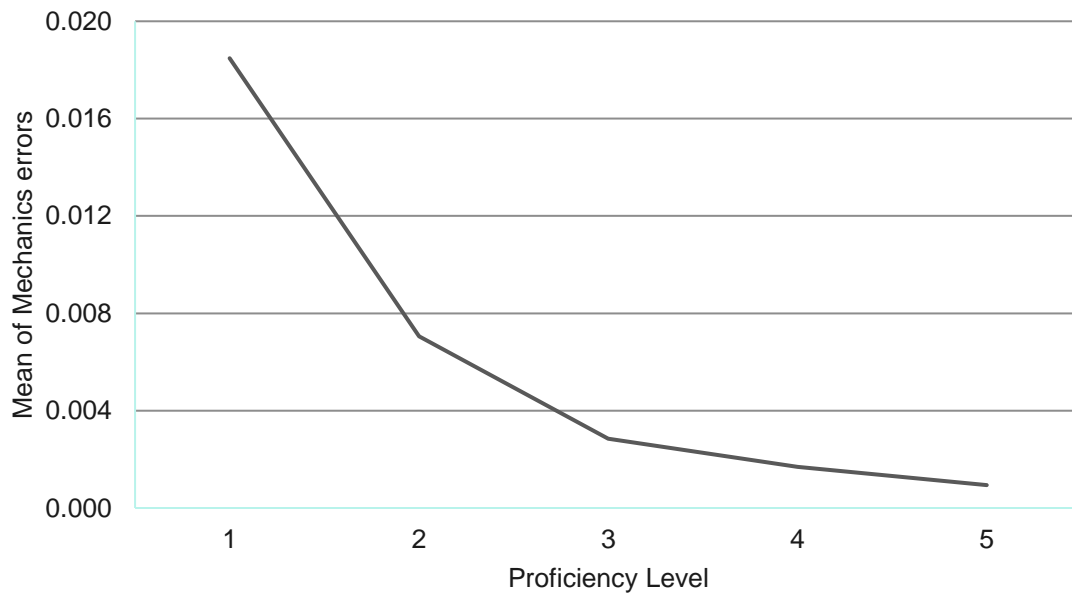## (Total number of words)
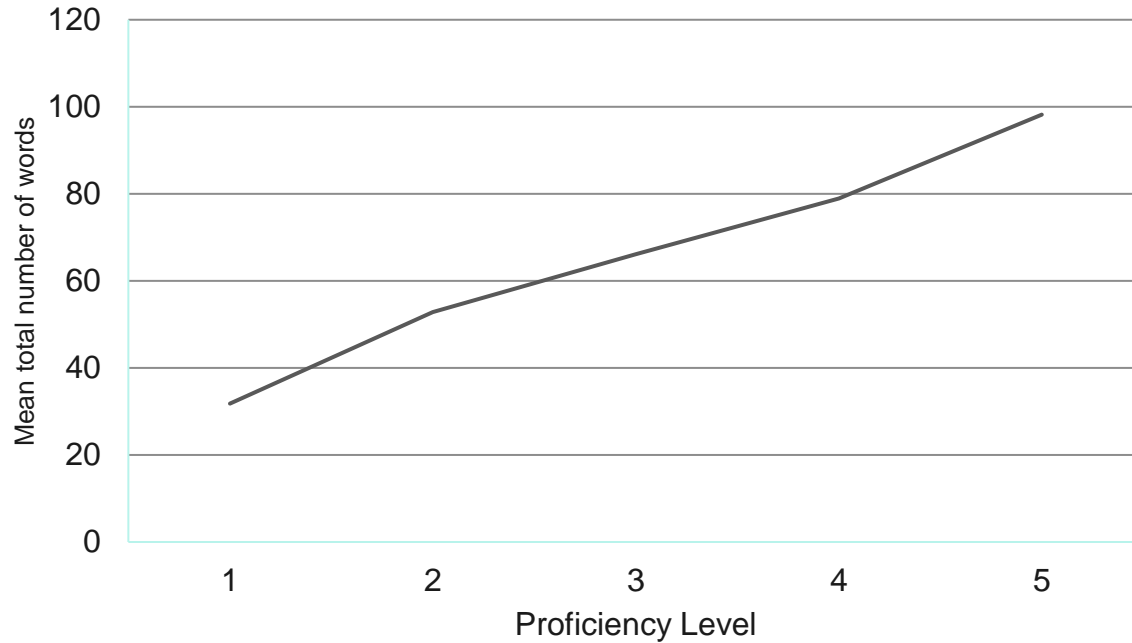
Lexical diversity
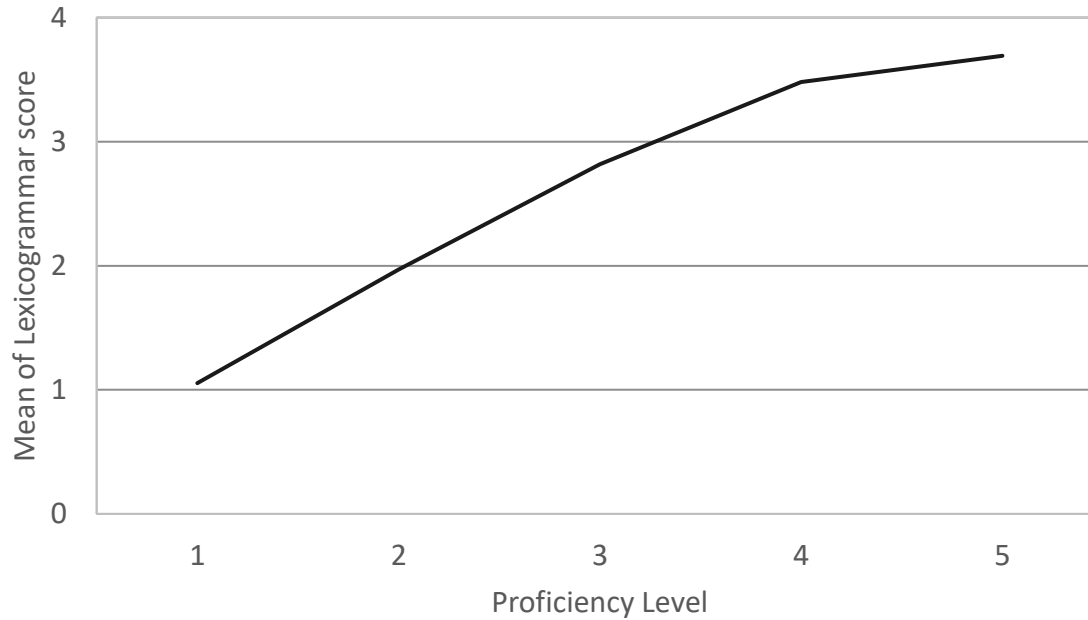## (Unique word types)
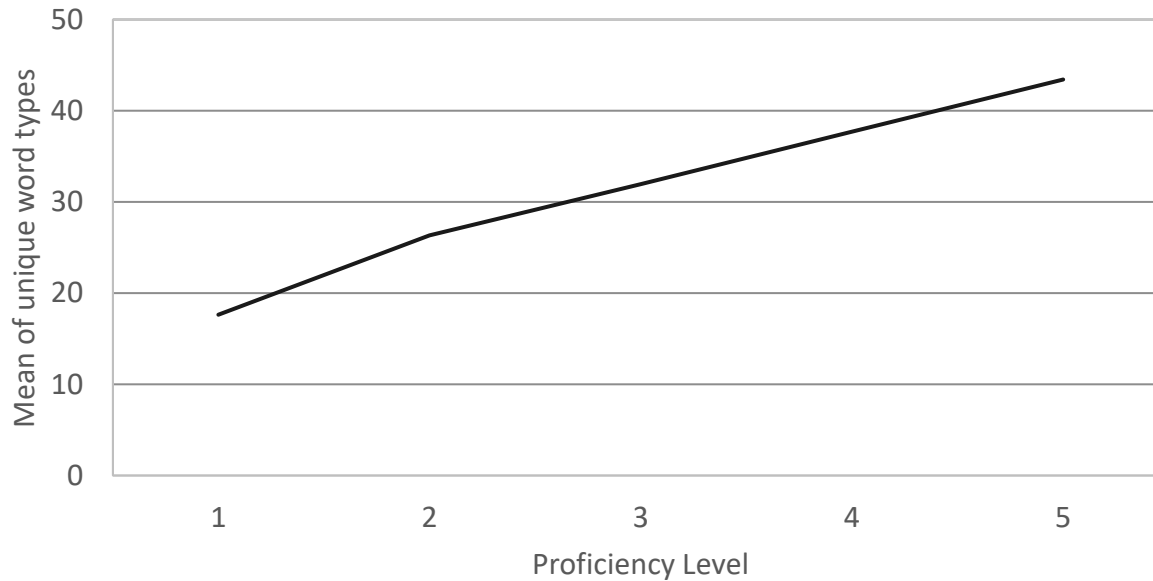
Mechanics

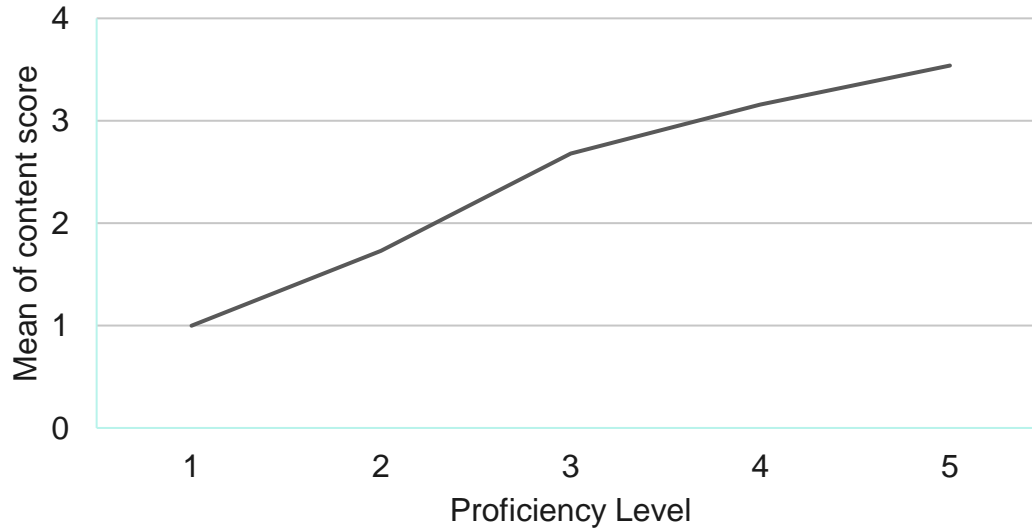**(Errors in capitalization, punctuation, etc.)**

Lexicogrammar
(Accuracy and diversity of vocabulary & grammar)

Content
(Completeness of responses to the email questions)

Sample student responses

Hi Good idea. I think we should start by making some posters and and hanging them up at school.   We should meet 2 times a week. At the schools gym. We should just ask people if they what to join.

(Task score 3)
(Grade 7, Denmark, Level 3)

Hi, Nice to hear that you have started to think about a chess club. I think you should meet 1-2 times a week because if it's more than that it can be hard for people to get to all of your meetings. Maybe you could meet in the school's library. It's a quiet place and it's peacefull there.   What if you made a Instagram account for the club? You could advertise your club there. Or maybe just make some posters and put them around your school. Maybe do both!   No problem, I'm glad you asked for help! Aaro

(Task score 4)
(Grade 8, Finland, Level 5)

RQ3: Teacher perceptions of email task

I think the email task is very ==similar== to what I ask my students to do in class, like write to a host family, talk about staying with them and so on. ... but this one, there are ==questions that students need to answer==, and ==this is different==. I actually might try this with my students.
(The Netherlands)

In this task, they have to ==respond to somebody== and ask them questions or ==answer questions==. ... This is ==more structured==; there are things they have to answer, so it's ==easier== for the students. To think it that way, I think this email could be ==really suitable== for my students.
(Finland)

I think the email task is something that every student should be able to write something about. They're ==very appropriate== and you can see from the way they answer, you can see if they are very ==skilled== or if they are ==struggling== with English, and so on. I think it's an assignment that's quite good because it's something they can ==relate== to.
(Denmark)

Pedagogical implications

- Email writing ability is related to different language skills for novice writers.
    - ✓ Teachers may consider integrating different language skills—such as reading an email prompt and writing an email response—to help young learners develop writing skills.

- Email task can be used to:
    - ✓ assess young learners' writing skills
    - ✓ teach language skills for purposeful communication
    - ✓ promote interactive language learning and provide opportunities for authentic use of language.

Q&A