

**ANALYSIS OF ORAL AND WRITTEN
SKILLS AMONG YOUNG LANGUAGE
LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY**

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Abstract

As the purpose of communication in second language learning is the achievement of a complex, fluent and accurate speech, young learners' oral and written features need to be taken into consideration. To contribute with evidence to the English language research, eight 6th graders of a Catalan school context participated in two oral and written tests. Results were analysed following the CAF (Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency) measures, with focus on accuracy, and showed that children are more proficient in compositions than in oral tasks, but still have lack of L2 resources and prioritize meaning over form and the use of formulaic language in the written samples.

Keywords: young language learners, productive skills, error analysis, CAF

Resum

Com que la finalitat de la comunicació en l'aprenentatge de segones llengües és adquirir una parla complexa, fluïda i precisa, cal considerar les característiques orals i escrites dels joves aprenents. Per contribuir amb evidències a la recerca de la llengua anglesa, vuit alumnes de 6è de primària d'un context escolar català participaren en dues proves orals i escrites. Els resultats es van analitzar seguint les mesures CAF, focalitzant la precisió, i mostren que els nens són més competents en redaccions que en tasques orals, però encara tenen manca de recursos de la segona llengua i prioritzen el significat per sobre de la forma i l'ús del llenguatge formulaic a les mostres escrites.

Paraules clau: aprenents de llengua joves, habilitats productives, anàlisi d'errors, CAF

Resumen

Dado que el propósito de la comunicación en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua es la adquisición de una habla compleja, fluida y precisa, las características orales y escritas de los estudiantes jóvenes se deben tener en cuenta. Con el fin de aportar evidencias a la investigación de la lengua inglesa, ocho alumnos de 6º curso de un contexto escolar catalán participaron en dos pruebas orales y escritas. El análisis con las medidas CAF, focalizando en la precisión, mostró que los niños son más competentes en las redacciones que en las tareas orales, pero aún carecen de recursos de la segunda lengua y priorizan el significado sobre la forma y el uso del lenguaje formulaico en las muestras escritas.

Palabras clave: aprendices de lengua jóvenes, habilidades productivas, análisis de errores, CAF

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing amount of research recently about how children's productive skills are developed. Spoken and written language are two modes of language that, according to Lintunen and Mäkilä (2014), have axiomatic different features, but together they are an essential part of learners' L2 skills.

Drew (2010) states that a proficient language user produces fluent, accurate, and complex language. Similarly, Sample and Michel (2014) found that young language learners' (from now on YLL) ongoing processes and related areas of performance (CAF, which stands for Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency) come into competition with each other. That is because when learners direct their attention to one dimension of CAF, it may reduce their attention for other areas, since the ability to create more creative utterances may mean more fluency but less accuracy. Hence, because learners prioritize meaning over form to reach their communicative goal, a conflict between form (complexity and accuracy) and fluency will arise. It should be noted, though, that Ellis (2003) identified a methodological problem in task-based CAF studies to provide a precise specification of the proficiency of the learners. The reason is because the author reports that the context in which the study is conducted, the attitudes and orientation to a task make a difference. The study thus addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: *What are the characteristics of 6th graders oral and written English in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency?*
- RQ2: *Regarding accuracy, which are the types and the most frequent errors 6th YLL graders make?*
- RQ3: *Are there any improvements or differences in pupils' language productions after a period of 8 weeks?*

The following lines aim at characterizing the oral and written English output produced by YLL, in order to be able to understand their oral and written language development.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. An overview to YLL characteristics

Even though it has been a controversial topic, some authors believe that language learning is linked to a critical period hypothesis which explains how very young children have a sensitive period to learn languages, lasting up to the age of about twelve. Thus, age has long been a factor examined in studies of L2 acquisition (Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2006), although Peregoy and Boyle (2001) argue that the amount of comprehensible input children receive is a key aspect so that the language can flourish, and thus, the amount and the quality of the exposure to the new language matters. In fact, Long (1983) states linguistic input has to be comprehensible so that it becomes useful data for second language acquisition. In addition to receiving input, learners have to be pushed to produce comprehensible output, to complete another important part of the process (Spanou & Zafiri, 2019). Children undergo a number of stages during the process of learning English as a foreign language. According to Piaget (1965), children in the upper-elementary grades, like the children involved in this project, are at the end of the concrete operational stage (age 7 to 11). At this stage, children start applying concrete logical mental operations (Amores, 2014), “but still have difficulty understanding some abstract or hypothetical concepts” (Vallbona, 2014, p.64).

It is believed that learners follow similar developmental sequences as in first language learning, to create their interlanguage (Drew, 2010). This fact is showed in Edelsky’s (1982) study with young learners in grades 1 to 3 because they used their first language knowledge to form hypotheses in the L2. However, they still preserve some features of their mother tongue. Thus, when they receive more L2 input and revise their hypotheses about the foreign language, they incorporate new forms into their interlanguage competence (Drew, 2010). Moreover, the quality of interlanguage performance is assessed in terms of its communicability, in other words, the present-day approaches have abandoned the goal of perfect, native-like speech in favor of clear and fluent speech useful for global communication (Grant, 2014). In this direction, Yazan (2015) argues that intelligibility, acknowledged as the ease of understanding speakers’ message, is a key aspect in language learning.

2.2. Productive skills

Turning now to the learners' productive skills, YLL's productions share some points when their oral and written discourses are analysed. Because their L2 knowledge is not complete, but still in progress, Drew (2010) claims they move from single words and fragments to stages that include declarative word order. In general, L2 productions tend to consist of short sentences, with a clear dominance of nouns rather than verbs. According to Llach and Gómez (2007), verbs and grammar structures are more difficult to use and understand because they belong to a higher level of abstraction than the use of nouns. Therefore, consistent with Piaget's theory, children are likely to understand concrete aspects and topics rather than abstract ones. They start learning vocabulary related and/or associated with their everyday life, so the topics under discussion are present in their surroundings, having tangible and immediate meanings, such as "table, tree, dog", though they start using verbs to explain what they like doing that justifies the relevance given to personal experiences by children of this age. In primary education, understanding is mainly semantic. Drew (2010) states that large numbers of both basic vocabulary and sophisticated words are good indicators of lexical complexity, whereas a narrow range of basic words shows lack of complexity. Grammatical structures are less obvious to learn because the attention is focused on meaning rather than on form itself. Notwithstanding, in the educational context, Oosthuizen (2005) states that explicit form-focused instruction leads to a better accuracy performance, due to the corrective feedback and negotiation of form.

Young L2 learners have fewer words at their disposal than L1 learners which prevents them from expressing their intended message, and usually leads them to use compensatory strategies when speaking and writing (Poulisse, 1997). Such strategies can be: using alternative ways of expression; avoiding certain grammatical structures; code-switching to L1; creating lexical inventions, etc., since they want to communicate at any price, and the "what" prevails over the "how". The use of these strategies decreases as learners get more proficient. In the specific case of children, many authors (Wood, 2002; Bell, 2012; Bret, 2014; Vallbona, 2014) claim that they use unanalysed language chunks that are stored as whole units, called formulaic language. It consists of what we know as the exemplar-based system, that along with the rule-based system (grammatical rules and knowledge) – not yet developed by young learners – children use to produce creative

output (Bret, 2014). In that sense, formulaic readymade formulae help them to develop their interlanguage, and learners with a higher level of English seem to be able to restructure already learned chunks of language to create new and longer utterances for their communicative purposes, also agreed by Bell (2012) who says that language play is often dependent on formulaic language. In this context, Amores (2014) suggests L2 input rich in formulaic language supports children's productive skills, but does not necessarily demonstrate children explicit language knowledge. After all, they are repeating memorized chunks of language.

Peregoy and Boyle (2001) state that most school programs introduce oral language earlier and more fully than written language, due to the common belief that early language teaching should ideally be communicative and imitate naturalistic settings as much as possible, but both need a good deal of time to spend simultaneously developing its abilities, since learning oral and written language is not an easy task. As mentioned by Al Hosni (2014), speaking is the most difficult skill for the majority of English learners mainly due to inhibition above others causing them not to talk often. However, Peregoy and Boyle (2001) say young learners are able to understand and speak English with relatively few misunderstandings. Even so, because young learners' grammatical, syntax, semantics, and phonology abilities are still developing, some features in their speech are not typical of standard English. For instance, they may at times confuse *he* and *she* and may not conjugate verbs conventionally (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). With unknown words, Catalan speakers tend to pronounce letter by letter as a result of the influence of spelling pronunciation (Grant, 2014). That is because in Catalan, speakers say and write words the same way they are written or pronounced, but English is said to have a "deep" language orthography since how the words are pronounced does not always help to work out how this word is actually written (Clúa, 2013). As an example, Catalan or Spanish children may say */kleʌn/ instead of /kli:n/, or may write *laif* instead of *life*.

2.3. Types of errors

A key variable that influences young language outputs is the first language, which may do so through negative transfer of structures and vocabulary, namely interference, or positive transfer (Drew, 2010). Children's mother tongue plays a big role in learning a second language and thus, interference is acknowledged as a major source of L2 errors.

For instance, the so-called false friends. In the same way, if two languages belong to the same language family, they may share similar grammatical structures that facilitate the learning of grammatical forms in the second language. While some researches claim that errors are a representation of the interlanguage stage, other recent studies believe they are evidence of progress in children's compositions (Vallbona, 2014). There are local and global errors. MacMartin-Miller (2014) explains that while local errors do not hinder communication and comprehension of the meaning of an utterance (i.e. subject-verb agreement, problems with the singular or plural of a noun, etc.), global errors are more serious than local errors because they interfere with communication (i.e. incorrect verb tense, incorrect word order, unclear message, etc.). Nonetheless, developmental errors understood as natural part of the learning must be considered in the teaching-learning process (Touchie, 1986).

In regard to the typology of errors, research has provided a great number of classifications. Touchie (1986) discriminates errors because of their linguistic level: the phonological, the lexical, the morphological, and the syntactic. Also, maintaining the belief that learners consider the vocabulary the most important aspect of language to communicate, there are four main categories of lexical inconsistencies (Llach & Gómez, 2007) among YLL: misspellings, borrowings, omissions and substitutions. Misspellings happen when the student does not write the word correctly. We also find omissions when students do not say or write words that they should. Borrowings occur when a word or a phrase has been taken from one language and used in another one, some learners even adapt some L1 words so that they sound or look English. This fact shows a better knowledge of the English language because they play with words. Bell (2012) points out that language play involves a manipulation associated not only with semantics and morphology but also with phonology, syntax or pragmatics. Finally, substitutions mean that a word is used instead of another, such as using "my" instead of "me". Children may use an item of vocabulary they know for others they do not know but which belong to the same word family. However, while Llach (2011) states that lexical errors are the most numerous according to many research studies, Serret (2017) carried out a study of written and oral errors with children aged 12-13, and found that grammar errors (e.g. subject omission, subject-verb agreement, incorrect verb tenses...) were the most prevalent, more present in oral productions than in writings, but these last had more variety of error types. She contemplates that written errors can be more easily avoided than oral errors, since

children have more time to think about what and how to say what they want choosing the most accurate way, so showing more quality of language production.

Taking all this into consideration, speaking and writing are two important aspects of a learner's L2 proficiency. Therefore, the production of these two skills should be carefully analysed in this project to see how the findings of the research match their productions.

3. Methodology

3.1. The study

For the purpose of this research, it was decided to use the interpretive research paradigm, through a case study applied in a Catalan school in order to examine the nature of the oral and written output proficiency of a sample of YLL, and to know whether oral and written skills share contact or divergence points. Some linguists consider spoken and written language as closely related modes of production, though others do not recognize the relationship at all (Lintunen & Mäkilä, 2015). Speaking and writing are two of the four skills stated in the Catalan Curriculum for foreign language learning. The curriculum itself states a clear common aim for L2 learners in primary education: when children finish their primary schooling, they should be able to participate in short oral interactions which are familiar to them such as dialogues about their daily lives (Bret, 2014), and to write short texts in a communicative and creative way, considering the purpose of the written text.

3.2. School context and participants

The school involved in this study is a semi-private school that attends children from 2 to 16 years old and provides a multilingual linguistic project on the basis of Catalan, Spanish, English, and French. The school also applies CLIL methodology, in which art is taught in English. They add speaking lessons, trips and theatre in English, and they celebrate the English Day. This school does not use textbooks, instead, two primary English teachers provide open and diverse activities about grammar and vocabulary, allowing the use of English for communication, through their own worksheets, active activities and the Snappet Pupil App. Thus, the participants from this school receive four English hours per week: two hours of English lessons, plus one hour of speaking and one

hour of CLIL. The current English and speaking lessons have no explicit focus on error treatment beyond the teacher's oral corrections.

Initially, the participants of the present study were nine children between eleven and twelve years of age, six boys and three girls, that have Catalan as their mother tongue. These learners were purposefully chosen of a total group of thirteen children, to include them into three groups: high, intermediate and low, as the study aims at examining their productive skills. Children's marks in the English subject provided by the teacher were a requisite to form the groups, acquiring a subsample of the different students' English levels. Nevertheless, one high achiever pupil did not show his real language proficiency because of disinterest and, therefore, he was eliminated from the sub-corpus. All the children in the sample attend extracurricular English lessons, except one high level pupil who is keen on watching films and reading in the English language.

3.3. Data collection instruments and procedure

In order to collect the learners' productive skills in English two tasks were used: a picture-elicited narrative (a monologic task) and a written composition. Both instruments were used at two different times: time 0 (beginning of the researcher's internship) and time 1 (end of the researcher's internship). The objective of collecting the data at two different times was done intending to see whether students changed or maintained their English productive skills after a period of eight weeks in a minimal exposure situation.

Picture-elicited narrative task

A cartoon called "Quick Sarah, quick!" was used to elicit participants' speech (*See Appendix A*). This cartoon consists of eight pictures that show one father and his daughter making a cake.

Participants were presented, one by one out of their classroom, with the cartoon and they were asked to retell the story that the images depicted. They had the drawings in front of them all the time while retelling the story. To do so, they had 1 minute of preparation before starting and did not get any help. Their voices were recorded.

Written composition

A written composition was given to the learners in their own classroom so as to gauge their writing skills. In order to control time and topic constraints and to make the compositions comparable, the participants were given the same amount of time, 20 minutes, to write an essay on the topic: My Life, considered to be a familiar and personal talking point about which all children could write. This task had been previously used by Vallbona's study (2014), with learners of similar ages. The task's instructions were given in Catalan to avoid misunderstandings, and either dictionaries or teacher's help were not allowed. The researcher stated it was not going to be assessed to create a calm atmosphere, but they were encouraged to write as much as they could.

3.4. Data analysis

Transcribed participants' production samples were coded and analysed under three categories: Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency, with the objective of estimating learners' oral and written skills level of proficiency. Because the participants of this research are very young language learners, down below specified units of analysis have been selected, used for both skills. Besides, in search of providing the CAF constructs meaning, they are defined as follows:

Complexity

Complexity is seen as the most controversial dimension of the three CAF constructs. It refers to the size, elaborateness, richness, diversity of the L2 performance, and the capacity to use advanced language (Michel, 2017).

Units of analysis: (1) Total Number of Nouns Types, and (2) Total Number of Lexical Verb Types.

These two measures refer to lexical complexity, where different word categories namely, noun and lexical verbs types were analysed, as opposed to the recurrence of the same nouns and verbs. Moreover, verb lexemes were counted as a single lexical item (Drew, 2010).

Accuracy

Accuracy is a measure for the target-like and error-free use of language. It measures the amount of deviation from the norm (Michel, 2017).

Units of analysis: (3) Total Number of Error Free Units and (4) Ratio between the Total Number of Error Free Units in relation to the Total Number of Units (Vallbona, 2014). In addition, because the research pays special attention to the accuracy dimension, lexical and morpho-syntactic error types were also examined and classified according to Llach and Gómez (2007), Saputri (2017), and Serret (2017). Repeated errors in the same words were counted once. Phonological errors were overlooked as the study of pronunciation was beyond the scope of this research. In this direction, Error Free Units were considered as such when they did not contain any type of morphological, syntactic and lexical errors.

Fluency

Fluency refers to the smooth, easy and eloquent production of speech with limited numbers of pauses, hesitations or reformulations. In contrast to complexity and accuracy, fluency is foremost a measure of spoken language, although writing research also uses measures of fluency (Michel, 2017).

Units of analysis: (5) Total Number of Words in English, (6) Total Number of Words, and (7) Total Number of Units (Vallbona, 2014).

Contracted forms were counted as one word, and borrowing words were included in the word count. Besides, Hunt's T-unit refers to "one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached or embedded within it" (Vallbona, 2014, p.146). One word units were not counted.

The texts were therefore analysed on the basis of the following measures:

| LEXICAL COMPLEXITY | ACCURACY | FLUENCY |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| (1) TNNT (2) TNLVT | (3) TNEFU (4) % TNEFU/TNU | (5) TNWE (6) TNW (7) TNU |
| | Lexical errors Morpho-syntactic errors | |

Mean scores for each measure were calculated for each of the three corpora. The quantitative data are supplemented by qualitative analyses of the texts through examples of the different categories measured, also bearing in mind relations between oral and written skills in order to triangulate data.

4. Results

4.1. The quantifiable CAF measures

Table 1 shows the Total Number of Words in each corpus.

Table 1. Fluency results: TNW

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 68 | 137.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 83.3 | 117 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 71 | 106.3 |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 102 | 165.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 72.3 | 128 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 84 | 78 |

Table 1 shows a slight progression in terms of the mean number of words per text from T0 to T1 in both productive skills, except for medium achievers in oral samples and low achievers in written samples. The oral number of words is less than written words, keeping a considerable distance since almost all learners at both oral T0 and T1 present scores lower than 100, whereas written scores are upper 100, not including low achievers at T1. In fact, the maximum written score of the high achievers (165.5) is more than double that of the low achievers (78). Nevertheless, these two sub-corpora show similar results in oral mean words at T0, but high achievers gain a great improvement at T1, that is to say, a variation of 34 words.

Table 2 shows the Total Number of Words in English in each corpus.

Table 2. Fluency results: TNWE

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|-------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 68 | 137.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 79.3 | 116.6 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 62.3 | 106 |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 101.5 | 165 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 69.3 | 127.6 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 75.6 | 77.3 |

As for TNWE, no remarkable differences were found at T0 nor T1 in the three groups. However, there are fewer words in English in the oral skills, especially in terms of medium and low achievers, than in the written skills, since written English words are in line with the TNW.

Table 3 shows the Total Number of Units in each corpus.

Table 3. Fluency results: TNU

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|-------------|------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | High | 7.5 | 20.5 |
| | Medium | 11.6 | 17.5 |
| | Low | 9.3 | 14.6 |
| T1 | High | 16.2 | 21 |
| | Medium | 10.2 | 18.3 |
| | Low | 11.6 | 12.3 |

The mean number of TNU shows no progress differences at T0 and T1 for none of the skills, except for high achievers at oral T1, who doubled (16.2) their previous score (7.5). At oral T0, though, medium and low achievers outperformed high achievers. As was the case for the mean TNW when contrasting both outputs, TNU is also incremented in written skills for all the groups. There is not a high spread between high and medium sub-corpora written scores, but while high achievers reach a mean (T0 and T1) of 20.8, low achievers obtain a mean of 13.5.

Low and medium achievers' units tended to be coordinated with *and* between two clauses, although some of them included *then*, *first* or *but*. As for high achievers, they used more variety of coordinated forms such as: *but*, *too*, *and*, *next*, *when*, *because*, *later*, *suddenly* or *then*. Besides, pupils' writings were mostly written using formulaic units which involved the verbs *to be* and *like*: *My name is*, *My favorite color/animal is*, *I like to play/I don't like...* even greetings and welcome: *I hope you like it*, although sub-corpora had quantitative and qualitative differences, since high achievers, followed by medium achievers, used more enriched explanations, e.g. *I don't like summer because I have a phobia with all the insects*.

Table 4 shows the Total Number of Error Free Units in each corpus.

Table 4. Accuracy results: TNEFU

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 3.5 | 17.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 2.6 | 6.6 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 0 | 2.3 |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 6 | 15.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 1 | 5 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 1 | 2.6 |

As a measure of accuracy, TNEFU were calculated. The results at T0 and T1 in both skills were significantly different in favor of the high achievers. In terms of oral performance medium achievers, and even more, low achievers show poor scores. Notwithstanding, better results for all the corpus are obtained in written samples, so high achievers exceed from oral to written skills at T0 from 3.5 to 17.5, and all the rest of the groups also doubled or trebled their scores in the written tests.

Moving further, if Table 3 and Table 4 are linked, we see that even though all groups obtained similar oral units' scores, and high and medium achievers obtained similar written units' scores, high achievers outperformed them in terms of TNEFU. Similarly, high achievers' written error-free units percentage is over 70%, where the rest is under 40%, even 22%. In general, a relation between TNEFU and TNU is slightly identified when pupils increase the amount of language but decrease the error-free units. For more visual results in this subject, see Table 5 in the Appendix B that shows the % Total Number of Error Free Units/Total Number of Units in the corpus.

Table 6 shows the Total Number of Noun Types in each corpus.

Table 6. Lexical complexity results: TNNT

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 9 | 31 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 12.3 | 21.6 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 9 | 19 |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 11.5 | 30.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 10 | 23 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 9 | 14.3 |

There are no notable differences between groups at oral T0 and T1, but written results scores keep a spread of around 10 mean words per text between each sub-corpus, especially at T1, following their hierarchy way, from high to low achievers. Once more, written results are higher than oral results. For example, at T0 there was a marked increase

in the number of noun types from 9 to 19 (low achievers), from 12.3 to 21.6 (medium achievers), and with a further increase from 9 to 31 noun types (high achievers). However, there are no representative changes between written T0 to T1, except for low achievers that obtain a half part (14.3) than high level pupils (30.5).

Noun types used in all the sub-corpora of oral samples were associated with the ones displayed in the picture: *dad, girl, cake, eggs, women, supermarket, present...* Regarding the written texts the noun types largely referred to school life, interests, homes, families, food and sports: *history, basketball, friends, ice cream, desserts, pasta, meat, homework, mother, twin, cats, turtles, penguins, computer games, mountain, town, weekend, nature, carnival, music...*

Table 7 shows the Total Number of Lexical Verb Types in each corpus.

Table 7. Lexical complexity results: TNLVT

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 10.5 | 12 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 7.3 | 8.6 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 5.3 | 10.3 |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 13.5 | 13.5 |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 8.6 | 12 |
| | <i>Low</i> | 5.6 | 8 |

In contrast with the TNNT, Table 7 shows no such differences between the two skills scores in what is referred to the TNLVT. Thus, lexical verb types appear to be quite common in both with just a slight increment in favor of the written samples, excepting for low achievers at T0 that experiment a double increase (10.3), and for high achievers at T1 that keep their score (13.5). However, in general, the groups experience a small improvement at different times tested in both skills.

Verb lexemes used in all the sub-corpora for oral samples were associated with actions displayed in the picture: *cook, need, buy, go, fall, give, look...* In the written texts most of them were referred to actions, such as: *live, play, read, be, like, make, have, travel...* Some children of each sub-corpus also wrote on a more abstract level: *think, hope, love, enjoy...* What's more, high achievers showed that they mastered a great range of verb tenses, where different verbs were being used, including phrasal verbs:

- (1) When I *grow up* I *don't know* what *to choose*: Draw or History.

(2) When I *was* 6 I *was* at a zoo, there *was* a bridge in a playground, the bridge *was made out of* trunks. I *fell* between two trunks and I *had* a lot of blood in my armpit. The wound *is* still there, it *healed* in the hospital.

A medium achiever pupil also showed the use of conditional:

(3) My BFF is N. *If you don't remember* what is BFF, I explain it.

4.2. Error analysis

Table 8 shows Lexical errors in each corpus.

Table 8. Accuracy errors results: Lexical errors

| Time | Error category | Number of errors | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | ORAL | | | WRITTEN | | |
| | | High | Medium | Low | High | Medium | Low |
| T0 | False Friends | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | L1 words | 0 | 12 | 24 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| | Problems with plurals | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Spellings | - | - | - | 1 | 17 | 43 |
| | Omissions | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| | Borrowings | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| | Substitutions | 1 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| Total Number of Errors | | 2 | 23 | 36 | 2 | 28 | 49 |
| T1 | False Friends | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | L1 words | 0 | 8 | 24 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | Problems with plurals | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| | Spellings | - | - | - | 0 | 23 | 29 |
| | Omissions | 2 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 5 |
| | Borrowings | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| | Substitutions | 3 | 8 | 11 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| Total Number of Errors | | 6 | 20 | 41 | 4 | 39 | 40 |

The highest number of lexical errors for high achievers was 6 at oral T1, while for medium achievers was 39 at written T1, and for low achievers 49 at written T0. Along the same line, low achievers double medium achievers' errors, but both are too far from achieving the outperformance of high achievers. There are more written errors than oral errors, although they get close scores which makes it irrelevant keeping in mind that written texts were much longer.

The most common types of oral lexical errors were by far L1 words (e.g. *pagar, molestar, cau al terra, nevera*), followed by substitutions (e.g. *she's, present*) and omissions (e.g. *And dad * happy*). On the other hand, the most prevalent written errors were spellings (e.g. *laif, ay, prifere, drowing*), followed by omissions (e.g. *I * nervous*), substitutions

(e.g. *My play computer games*) and borrowings (e.g. *asignatur*). Problems with plurals were occasionally seen, and false friends were not identified.

Table 9 shows Morpho-syntactic errors in each corpus.

Table 9. Accuracy errors results: Morpho-syntactic errors

| Time | Error category | Number of errors | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | ORAL | | | WRITTEN | | |
| | | High | Medium | Low | High | Medium | Low |
| T0 | Incorrect verb tense | 0 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 9 |
| | Articles | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| | Word order | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Subject-verb agreement | 11 | 8 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| | Prepositions/Conjunctions | 1 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| | Negative constructions | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Infinitive “to” | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| | Comparative/Superlative | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total Number of Errors | | 13 | 14 | 25 | 3 | 14 | 18 |
| T1 | Incorrect verb tense | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 10 | 6 |
| | Articles | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| | Word order | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| | Subject-verb agreement | 8 | 11 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| | Prepositions/Conjunctions | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| | Negative constructions | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Infinitive “to” | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Comparative/Superlative | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Total Number of Errors | | 12 | 20 | 13 | 7 | 22 | 13 |

The most common types of oral morpho-syntactic errors were subject-verb agreement (e.g. *He don't see it*), followed by incorrect verb tenses (e.g. *He is enter in the supermarket*), and prepositions and conjunctions (e.g. *The eggs broke in the floor*). It should be highlighted that while at T0 just high achievers used past verb tenses and the rest used present simple when talking about the past, at T1 all sub-groups showed past tenses. Articles, negative constructions, word order and the infinitive “to” were seen occasionally. As for written morpho-syntactic errors, we first identify incorrect verb tenses (e.g. *First I havend a hamster*), followed by prepositions and conjunctions (e.g. *I don't like carnival but [because] are more sounds and bery tall music*), subject-verb agreement (e.g. *She go to her house*), word order (e.g. *Is compulsory play for M.*) and articles (e.g. *I do the 12 years*). The third-person –s ending on present tense verbs was almost always missing. Different from the oral, in the written samples comparative and superlative forms errors appear (e.g. *The animal more cutest in the world*).

5. Observed trends and discussion

If we have a close look at the general characteristics of 6th graders, and of each sub-corpus, the results obtained show no remarkable variations between oral and written T0 and T1, except for a tendency to increase the TNW at T1. As Peregoy and Boyle (2001) suggest, it could indicate that the amount and quality of the input received had no sufficient time to flourish. The English teacher nor the researcher planned a special intervention to foster these skills and the children were only tested following the natural pace of the English lessons. Long (1983) adds that input has to be comprehensible to be used in the L2. The teacher did not prepare differentiated activities and materials for each sub-corpus, but the Snappet App takes different levels and needs into account to acknowledge this individualized comprehensible input, though it is only occasionally used, which implies that in most classes all pupils do the same.

Regarding **fluency**, low achievers' texts are shorter than medium and high achievers' texts, and low and medium achievers show more non-English words in their oral productions. High achievers clearly wrote more and they used more noun types which means that lexical variation, considered as a complexity indicator, also influences fluency. According to Bret (2014) and Bell (2012), learners with a higher level of English are more likely to restructure their already known language to create new and longer utterances for their communicative purposes, and the teacher usually creates communication tasks linked to meaningful contexts. Thus, the need to communicate may have prompted medium and high achievers to write more. High achievers also showed a great number of words and units at oral T1 because, initially, they demonstrated to have a good synthesis capability, and at T1 they were encouraged to tell more details about the story. However, even if medium and high level pupils are still on the top of the oral mean number of words and units' results, their scores for the oral skill are lower. The two tasks were considered appropriate for their age, but they were different in nature: telling a story about a picture and writing about their own life. In agreement with Llach and Gómez (2017), children give more relevance to personal experiences, therefore, the writing task may have been easier to handle. Participants are not habitually used to practice picture-elicited narrative tasks.

Moving further, L1 words in the written scores are rarely seen whereas they are present in the oral results by low and medium achievers. This shows how co-switching to L1 is a

compensatory strategy that children use to express their intended message (Poulisse, 1997), especially in oral contexts where they do not have enough time to use other compensatory strategies, and its usage decreases when learners get more proficient, as the high level sub-corpus.

As for **accuracy**, taking into account the length of the samples and in conformity with Serret (2017), there are fewer errors in the compositions than in the oral task because children have more time to think about what and how to write their intended message in the most accurate way. While low and medium achievers present a great number of errors, high achievers demonstrate quite good error-free scores, especially in the written samples, with less diversity of errors in both skills because of their better level of English. Notwithstanding, we have to consider Grant's (2014) statement that says that teachers have abandoned the goal of perfect native-like speech in favor of clear and fluent speech useful for communication, which is shared by the English teacher. Hence, when pupils write more words, the number of errors increases, and vice versa. CAF performance comes into competition due to the control function of attention that prioritizes certain performative aspects over others (Sample & Michel, 2014).

Retaking the four lexical inconsistencies by Llach and Gómez (2007), the present study also confirms them as the most common errors by YLL. Spellings are very common in the written context by low achievers, followed by medium achievers, since they rely on spelling pronunciation (Grant, 2014) and English has a deep language orthography (Clúa, 2013). In some cases, the students clearly translated from L1, and they borrowed some L1 words adapting them to the English sounds, showing a language creative process and better English comprehension (Llach and Gómez, 2007). Omissions were seen in both productive skills, especially subject omissions probably due to the fact that Catalan speakers usually make use of the elliptical subject. Children also used substitutions because of the influence of the L1 and their lack of knowledge of the target language, being unable to discriminate items of vocabulary of the same word family. Hence, interference was the main cause of errors among YLL, consistent with Drew (2010), so positive transfer was not seen as English and pupils' L1 do not belong to the same language family. Vallbona (2014) points out that errors are evidence of the children's learning process.

There were more lexical errors than grammar ones, in line with Llach (2011), but in contrast with Serret (2017), yet the sub-types found are shared. Incorrect verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions and conjunctions took a relevant place. Articles were mainly seen in the compositions. Actually, the English teacher tends to rely on meaning-focus instruction by eliminating textbooks, so implicit grammar teaching maintains a high role in the upper cycle. It is not rare to identify such grammar mistakes since Oosthuizen (2005) claims that implicit form-focused instruction leads to a lower accuracy performance. Oral skills usually incorporate present continuous combined with present and past tenses as the nature of the task and the skill prevent them to construct the language in a more conscious way. Moreover, children face errors because they do not manage these new structures yet. Negative form problems were also identified due to the Spanish/Catalan transfer of the negative adverb “no”. As for comparative and superlative forms, they were being studied at T0, but the two of the three times they were identified in the compositions present errors, which shows that the learning may be meaningful but the form acquisition was not complete. Learners practiced it by creating and playing a quiz challenge but did not receive specific corrective feedback about it (Oosthuizen, 2005). Apart from the influence of the teacher’s teaching practice, Llach and Gómez (2007) argue that verbs and grammar structures are challenging for children because they belong to a higher level of abstraction. In addition, Bret (2014) suggests that YLL have not yet developed grammatical rules and knowledge so they use the exemplar-based system and the rule-based system to produce their own creative output.

Moving to **lexical complexity**, Llach and Gómez (2007) believe learners consider vocabulary the most important aspect of language to communicate. Accordingly, results show the great number of nouns that participants are able to use in their written productions, especially high and medium achievers, since low achievers demonstrate fewer noun types and thus, using a narrow range of basic words shows lack of complexity (Drew, 2010). Regarding oral skills, noun types appear to be minor but the task itself requires the use of certain established nouns. However, pupils did not pay special attention to details and limited their description to the actions. This explains the lower spread variation between oral and written scores for lexical verb types’ scores. Thematic words linked to their daily lives are present in all the three sub-corpora compositions, along with Llach and Gómez (2007), because they are closely related to children’s personal experiences, having most of them tangible meanings and by revealing that it is

natural for children to acquire more nouns than verbs. Participants are in the concrete operational stage, where they still have difficulty understanding abstract concepts (Vallbona, 2014). Even so, high achievers and some medium achievers used richer and abstract concepts, taking into account that they are now at the end of the mentioned Piaget's stage (1965). The teacher also started to set a vocabulary list during the period of this research, related to the new vocabulary that was being used or needed in the lessons, such as the terms "compulsory" or "join" that were seen in the writings at T1. Thus, although there are no convincing variations of TNNT between different times, at T1 there are some complex nouns.

High achievers displayed a greater variety of verb forms and tenses, predominating "to have, to be, to like, to go" and including imperative and the present perfect. At oral and written T0 medium and low achievers use lexical verbs in the present tense to describe past experiences, while at T1 all pupils use the past simple. The reason is because between the two times tested, participants started a new learning unit about the past simple tense (not yet finished at T1). Thus, improvement in the verbs' conjugation is seen although they overgeneralize rules for specific irregular verbs (e.g. *She brooked*) in attempts to form the past simple, due to developmental errors not fully developed (Touchie, 1986). These verbs require memorization that did not take place, regardless of the fact that verb tenses are considered a global error that interferes with communication (MacMartin-Miller, 2014). Unlike oral texts, most of the participants showed formulaic language in their compositions, especially low achievers who relied a lot on it. Hence, Amores (2014) states that it helps children's productive skills, but does not necessarily demonstrate pupils' level, since they are repeating already known chunks of language. Consequently, accuracy can also seem to be better. High and medium achievers, though, used a more complex language and showed a creative language construction because of their communicative purposes (Bret, 2014). Bell (2012) claims that formulaic language provides a point of reference for language play, but when children attempt the chance to create their own language, accuracy is affected. This is a case of a medium achiever who showed difficulties when communicating his message: *I prifere wother [water] nou erd [earth]*. When asking for the meaning, he said he prefers swimming than running, but because he did not know how to express it, he used the idea of water versus earth, the ground. Children are in search of strategies to get their message across and they penalize form in favor of meaning, by avoiding certain grammatical structures (Drew, 2010).

Being creative may be a way to progress in language acquisition although pupils may sometimes fail in intelligibility (Yazan, 2015), since the boy's intended message was not figured out easily. Nonetheless, high achievers also showed interplay but without many errors which shows their greater proficiency by controlling both formulaic language and the ability to play with it.

To sum up, in search of providing contact and divergence points between the two productive skills, achievers are more fluent in the compositions than in the oral productions, especially high and medium achievers. Al Hosni (2014) believes speaking is the most difficult skill mainly because of the inhibition and shyness above others. Participants of this research are not used to practice oral monologues, instead, their oral activities are cooperative active games, with some team presentations, consistent with Peregoy and Boyle (2001) to achieve communicative and naturalistic settings. L1 words are more frequently seen in oral texts, and oral language was often repetitive (e.g. *and the girl enters, and the girl...*), as they had no preparation time. Lack of accuracy takes an important role in both skills since children undergo a creative language construction process based on structuring formulaicity and creativity that foster longer sentences while modifying rules of their own (Bell, 2012). Still, written texts are easily better corrected as their error-free units are doubled or trebled, although results show no clear variations in terms of the number of the error types between the two skills. Lexical errors seem to be slightly higher in written texts whereas morpho-syntactic errors are more present in oral samples, in line with Serret (2017). Productive skills generally have in common the same diversity of errors, although oral texts show more substitutions, L1 words and subject-verb agreement errors, and written texts show more incorrect verb tenses. Besides, written texts show a greater variety of noun types, but lexical verb types are more balanced in both skills, with just slightly higher scores, again, in written samples. The typology of nouns and verbs employed in each productive text are different because of the tasks' nature, but agreed by all the three sub-corpora. Formulaic language is strongly seen in written texts but not in oral productions. Finally, the interrelation between the CAF measures must be considered, so if teachers want to work on fluency, they may overlook accuracy in order to isolate difficulties. In the end, oral and written skills are a challenge for children and as Peregoy and Boyle (2001) would say, children need scaffolding, high quality input, and a good deal of time to spend simultaneously developing these two abilities.

6. Conclusions

The present study aimed at describing the characteristics of 6th graders' oral and written proficiency, the role of accuracy, and whether pupils' skills evolved after a period of 8 weeks.

Recalling the RQ1 *What are the characteristics of 6th graders oral and written English in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency?*, children are now ready to express their own thoughts and construct their own sentences, still with basic or grammatically incorrect sentences, corroborating what Serret (2017) agreed about the easy avoidance of inaccuracy in the written tasks. Low achievers tend to produce shorter sentences based on formulaic language in the written context, and higher achievers show more creative language construction. Noun and verb types used are loyal to daily vocabulary but grammatical structures are mirrored in the children's teacher implicit teaching. All pupils gave more attention to vocabulary and meaning than on grammar and form, which still belong to an abstract level for them. However, different levels of proficiency were observed among the same class subjects, with the evidence that writing skills outperformed oral skills.

Concerning the RQ2 *Regarding accuracy, which are the types and the most frequent errors 6th YYL graders make?*, results show that the most common errors among 6th graders are misspellings, omissions, borrowings (including L1 words), substitutions, subject-verb agreement and verb tenses due to L1 interference and developmental errors. By going through a language creative process beginners rely on their intuition and form new hypotheses that lead to error making, contributing to their learning process.

Looking back on the RQ3 *Are there any improvements or differences in pupils' language productions after a period of 8 weeks?*, the present research displays that a period of 8 weeks is not enough time of exposure to the language to see important differences regarding proficiency, although there is evidence of new knowledge (verb tenses, new complex nouns...). At least, not without a special intervention designed to foster these skills.

All in all, the CAF measures and error analysis are good tools for teachers to know their students' language development performance, and where they succeed or fail in order to

improve their own teaching practice, such as where to put more emphasis to work the language in a proper way to help each learner, acquiring more awareness about the teaching-learning process. Along with that, the future lines of this research would study how explicit and implicit teaching affect children's accuracy, as well as the error treatment as a way of self-evaluation by children and the English teacher, since he/she is the main source of learners' input and motivation.

The results reported, however, should be considered in the light of some limitations. First, the evidence obtained is closely related to this specific school context, which may not be generalized, since the sample is limited. In this line, while medium and low sub-corpora were made by three children in each group, high achievers were just two because of the exclusion of one high level pupil. Third, although I tried to set up contact and divergence points between the oral and written skills, there is a lack of previous research studies contrasting these two productive skills, so it has been a challenge to provide data regarding that topic in the discussion.

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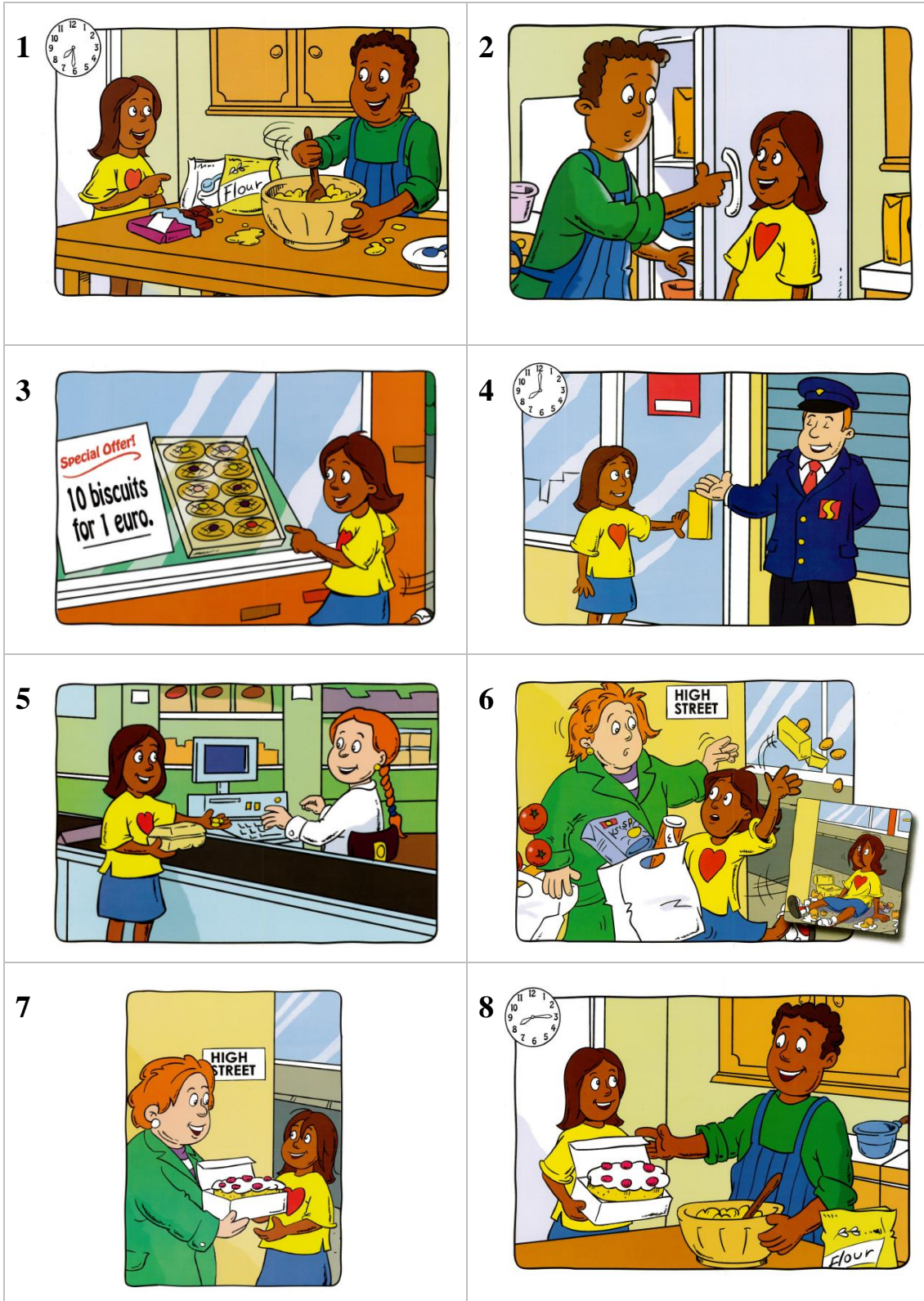
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8. Appendices

- Appendix A: Picture-elicited narrative



- **Appendix B: Table 5. Accuracy results: Ratio TNEFU/TNU**

Table 5. Accuracy results: Ratio TNEFU/TNU

| Time | Proficiency | Mean | |
|------|---------------|-------|---------|
| | | ORAL | WRITTEN |
| T0 | <i>High</i> | 46.6% | 85.4% |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 22.4% | 37.7% |
| | <i>Low</i> | 0% | 14.3% |
| T1 | <i>High</i> | 37% | 73.8% |
| | <i>Medium</i> | 9.8% | 27.3% |
| | <i>Low</i> | 8.6% | 21.1% |