



The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>
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Young EFL emergent writers: An investigation into vocabulary and textual features of high and low achievers' writing

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Introduction

Writing proficiency is one of the most important skills in second/foreign language (L2/FL) learning. A competent writer is expected to possess linguistic, discourse and sociolinguistic knowledge, and (metacognitive) strategic competence (Yoon & Burton, 2020). Hulstijn (2011, p. 242) also defines writing proficiency as “the extent to which an individual possesses the linguistic cognition necessary to function in a given communicative situation” in writing. It contains (1) basic language cognition (BLC, writers’ lexical and syntactic repertoires, as well as the availability of these lexical units and syntactic structures in the form of more or less ready-made procedures) and (2) higher language cognition (HLC) comprising less frequent lexical and grammatical units such as academic English. Whilst all adult first-language (L1) writers fully equip themselves with BLC but their HLC levels vary, L2 learners may perform better than L1 speakers in HLC whereas they have various degrees of BLC (Hulstijn, 2011). The differences between L1 and L2 writers have attracted scholars’ attention to investigate L2 learners’ writing proficiency development.

Research on developing L2/FL writing proficiency has been largely devoted to the writing of adults and adolescents learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Cheng & Tsang, 2022), while little attention has been paid to young learners. In light of the cognitive and affective differences between young and adult learners, scholars call for more empirical studies that describe the characteristics of writing produced by young FL learners (Bae & Bachman, 2010). Against this backdrop, this mixed-methods study investigated vocabulary and textual features of writing produced by low- and high-proficiency Hong Kong young EFL learners. The overarching research question was: *How does higher-proficiency young EFL learners’ writing differ from that produced by lower-proficiency learners?* We focused on differences at the word, clausal and text levels.



Literature Review

Studies on the measurement of young L2/FL learners' writing not only focus on general features of written texts but attend to some distinctive features of beginning learners (e.g., spelling). Bae and Lee (2012) proposed five trait factors (grammar, content, coherence, spelling, and text length) for primary school EFL learners and found that the factors were valid to gauge their writing proficiency. The students made significant improvements in all the dimensions by the end of an eighteen-month EFL programme. The findings also indicate that rating scales used for writing produced by beginning EFL learners should also consider distinctive features (e.g., spelling) that need not be attended to in advanced learners' writing.

While Bae and Lee's (2012) study provided a comprehensive measurement of young EFL learners' writing abilities from five trait factors, other studies narrow the scope to only one specific feature. Among the various factors, writers' vocabulary knowledge is fundamental because grammatical encoding is lexically-driven (Levitt, 1999). For young learners, spelling is the most discussed because it reflects learners' ability to "encode" the language (Bae & Bachman, 2010). He and Wang's (2009) longitudinal study investigated the invented spelling of young EFL learners (i.e. spelling words based on knowledge of grapheme-phoneme principles (e.g., "cooke" for "cookie")) in their writing. The findings demonstrated that young learners' spelling mistakes in writing may be attributed to their lack of morphological knowledge and inaccurate understanding of lexical representations of phonemes in words. Other studies at the word level examined vocabulary use. For example, Kim and Hwang (2022) found that high-proficiency young EFL learners tended to use complex verb patterns (e.g., "Mary faxed John a letter") more frequently in their writing. Low-achieving learners, however, simply used verbs with limited knowledge of these complex patterns (e.g., "The boy is a student"). Although these studies highlight the importance of accurate spelling and rich vocabulary knowledge in writing, little is known as regards the vocabulary profile of young EFL learners' writing.

Compared with the empirical evidence on young EFL learners' writing abilities at the word level, these learners' writing practices at the clausal and text levels have received even less attention. Although the proper use of connectives ensures writing cohesion and coherence at the sentence and textual levels (Crossley et al., 2016), in F  rez Mora et al.'s (2021) study of Grade-6 Spanish EFL learners, low-achieving writers employed fewer causal conjunctions than high-achievers did; there were even zero occurrences of contrastive and temporal conjunctions in low-proficiency learners' writing. The findings imply low-achieving writers' limited knowledge of connectives.

Furthermore, EFL learners need to equip themselves with genre knowledge (knowledge about language and structural features of a specific text type) (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). In primary-level EFL classes, letters and stories are two genres that have been much discussed, but they differ in function and structure. Stories consist of orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Christie & Derewianka, 2008), while greeting, body text, and farewell are included in personal letters (Bae & Bachman, 2010). The current literature implies that the genre knowledge of young learners needs to be developed. Taking the functional linguistic perspective, Christie and Derewianka (2008) found that, in story writing, L1 adolescent writers were more capable of building abstraction and generalisation, whereas young learners (aged 6-8) demonstrated considerable use of unmarked topical themes and excessive reliance on personal pronouns. However, there is a scarcity of research exploring whether low- and high-proficiency young EFL writers exhibit different degrees of genre awareness. Considering the insufficient evidence depicting high- and low-proficiency young learners' writing at the word, clausal, and text levels, this study set out to fill the gaps by investigating the vocabulary profiles, spelling, connective use, and genre awareness in Hong Kong primary-level EFL learners' writing.

Methods

Context and Participants

The data reported in this study came from a larger project about young Hong Kong EFL learners' language proficiency and different individual variables such as perceptions and emotions. A total of 154 Grade 3-4 EFL students completed an A2 Key for Schools Writing test, which included an email/letter to a friend and a story (See descriptions and sample papers¹). When the study was conducted, these participants had studied English for around six years. The two genres had been introduced in their regular EFL lessons and all had experience writing both before sitting the test in this study.

Procedure

The test, which lasted 20 minutes, was administered in a group setting. The papers were marked independently by two in-service primary EFL teachers with experience in marking writing tests. Both teachers attended a training session in which the marking rubrics and writing samples were discussed before they marked the papers. Adhering to the official marking scheme², a score of 0-5 was given for content, organisation, and language each (hence a total of 15). In each category, for scores showing a 1-mark difference, the average was taken as the final score (e.g. 1 and 2 gave 1.5). For scores with 2-or-more-mark differences, both teachers were asked to remark the papers and discuss until a consensus was reached. Around 5% of the scores showed 2-or-more-mark differences. The markers re-graded and discussed those papers, leading to all scores within a 1-mark margin.

Data Analysis

Twenty pieces of writing receiving the highest and another 20 obtaining the lowest overall scores were selected for analysis in this study. These 40 Grade 4 EFL learners (22 females and 18 males) aged 9-10. The high-achieving group obtained an average of 11.000 out of 15.000 points in the email/letter and 10.900 out of 15.000 in the story. The low-achieving group had a mean of 2.100 and 3.575 out of 15.000 points for the two topics respectively. The two groups of students obtained significantly different scores in both writing [$t(38)=20.334$ and 13.906 respectively, $p<.001$].

Each writing script was analysed using Lexical Frequency Profiler (LFP), which was an indicator of students' productive vocabulary³. The LFP provides the counts and proportions of words used according to their frequency of occurrence in English, representing students' lexical richness (Laufer & Nation, 1995). We employed Cobb's VocabProfilers⁴ to construct the LFP of students' writing, identifying the frequency levels of vocabulary used according to the British National Corpus (BNC)/Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) word lists. Given that primary-level EFL students would not be using a large amount of low-frequency words, we followed the categorisation by Lo and Murphy (2010) and examined the K1 (the most frequent 1000 words in English), K2, and K3+ (i.e. beyond 2000) words used by students. Skewness and kurtosis values were obtained using SPSS 28.0 to determine if the data were normally distributed. All measures were normally distributed, with skewness ranging from -1.285 to 1.611, and

¹ Cambridge Assessment English, 2023 (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/key-for-schools/exam-format/>).

² Cambridge Assessment English, 2023 <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/key-for-schools/preparation/>

³ Originally, we intended to also analyse the scripts using other software to detect differences beyond the word level. However, the writing scripts of early learners were short, and they were not always punctuated appropriately, making it difficult to arrive at meaningful and valid clausal or textual comparisons quantitatively.

⁴ Retrieved from Tom Cobb's VocabProfilers in 2021, <https://www.lexutor.ca/vp/>.

kurtosis values from -0.970 to 1.627, which are within ± 2 indicating normality according to Roever & Phakiti (2017), except for the K2 and K3+ tokens for stories. For these two non-normally distributed measures, we performed Mann-Whitney U tests to compare the high- and low-achieving students. For the rest of the normally distributed measures, we conducted independent samples t-tests. We also compiled a list of words used only by the high-achieving students to examine their lexical richness.

Moreover, we studied the scripts in-depth to identify any qualitative differences of high- and low-achieving students. One of the authors and a trained research assistant (RA), who were experienced teacher educator and/or had teaching experience, read the data first separately to identify the features of writing demonstrated by the high- and low-achieving students, using both deductive (consulting the existing writing literature) and inductive (coding features based on the data) approaches (Zacharias, 2012). For example, given that previous research has revealed spelling as an important area of investigation, it was considered in the initial data analysis. Reference was also made to the assessment criteria of the Cambridge Assessment test. For instance, when grading organisation, the criteria of using cohesive devices and connecting words were included, and an example problem specified was to start an email with a title (i.e., problem with understanding of the genre)⁵. Connectives and genre awareness were therefore considered. The author and the RA then met and discussed the analysis, ultimately arriving at a list of salient features which were evident in the writing of at least half of the students, i.e., 10 or more students, in the high- and low-achieving groups. Due to the scope of this paper, we only focused on some language and organisation features (and not “content”), including spelling, connective use, and genre awareness. Samples of student writing will be shown below to exemplify these features.

Findings

Vocabulary Profiles

The results for letters/emails are shown in Table 1. The high-achieving students used significantly more words (44.000 words) than the low-achievers (33.650 words) with a large effect size ($d=0.857$), indicating that the former wrote longer. The high-achievers also used significantly more K1 words than the low-achievers with a large effect size ($d=0.823$). There were no significant between-group differences regarding K2 and K3+ words. Interestingly, the percentages of K1, K2, and K3+ words were similar between the two groups of students with no statistically significant differences.

TABLE 1
LFP of High- and Low-Achieving Students in Letters/Emails

	High-achieving <i>M (SD)</i>	Low-achieving <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t (p)</i>	<i>d</i>
Number of words	44.000 (11.060)	33.650 (13.023)	2.709 (p=.010*)	0.857
K1 words	40.800 (10.426)	31.350 (12.453)	2.602 (p=.013*)	0.823
K2 words	1.850 (1.387)	1.450 (1.605)	0.843 (p=.404)	0.267
K3+ words	1.350 (1.631)	0.850 (1.137)	1.125 (p=.268)	0.356
K1 %	92.788 (4.861)	93.181 (6.891)	0.208 (p=.836)	0.066
K2 %	4.186 (2.982)	4.428 (5.090)	0.184 (p=.855)	0.058
K3+ %	3.025 (3.677)	2.391 (3.180)	0.583 (p=.282)	0.184

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 2 shows the results for stories. The high-achieving students also produced significantly more words than the low-achievers (a substantial difference in means: 60.400 versus 33.550 words) with a large effect

⁵ Guide for assessing writing for Cambridge Assessment: https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/pl/Images/603898-cer-6647-v1c-jul20_teacher-guide-for-writing-a2-key-for-schools.pdf

size ($d=1.948$). As for vocabulary frequency, the high-achieving students wrote significantly more K1, K2, and K3+ words than the low-achievers with medium to very large effect sizes ($d=0.677$ – 2.006). The proportions of K1, K2, and K3+ words were also comparable between the two groups of students.

TABLE 2

LFP of High- and Low-Achieving Students in Stories

	High-achieving	Low-achieving	$t / U^a (p)$	d
	$M (SD)$	$M (SD)$		
Number of words	60.400 (15.955)	33.550 (11.190)	6.162 ($p<.001^{***}$)	1.948
K1 words	57.050 (14.073)	32.050 (10.610)	6.344 ($p<.001^{***}$)	2.006
K2 words	2.150 (1.814)	0.900 (1.021)	U=112.500 ($p=.014^*$)	0.807
K3+ words	1.200 (1.152)	0.600 (1.142)	U=125.000 ($p=.028^*$)	0.677
K1 %	94.921 (2.998)	95.728 (3.804)	0.745 ($p=.230$)	0.236
K2 %	3.272 (2.376)	2.530 (2.636)	0.936 ($p=.178$)	0.296
K3+ %	1.807 (1.619)	1.742 (3.031)	0.084 ($p=.467$)	0.027

Note: a: Unless otherwise specified, the value reported is a t -value. $^*p<.05$; $^{***}p<.001$

The vocabulary items produced by the two groups of students were compared. We extracted all the words each participant used and examined whether there were words uniquely used by the high-achieving students. Table 3 lists the words produced exclusively by the high-achievers. Around one third of K1 words (34 out of 95) were nouns (e.g., house; lunch), but there were also verbs (e.g., arrive; choose), and adjectives (e.g., wonderful; soft), which could give rise to richer content in the writing. In addition, the high-achieving students also produced a range of adverbs and conjunctions as connectives (e.g., finally, later, when). As for K2 and K3+ words, the majority were nouns.

TABLE 3

Words Exclusively Used by High-Achieving Students

Frequency levels	Words	Parts of speech (counts)
K1	afternoon, again, all, arrive, bag, balls, before, beside, big, bored, brother, bus, busy, call, centre, choose, clothes, cool, down, dress, drive, early, eight, end, evening, ever, fast, father, feed, finally, first, for, forest, found, full, great, green, half, hat, help, here, hot, house, into, jumped, lake, later, letter, look, lunch, many, morning, nature, near, never, new, party, past, people, place, please, pointing, prepare, remember, ready, replied, Saturday, school, shirt, shoes, soft, stop, start, suit, supermarket, sure, sweet, talk, tell, than, these, thing, three, throw, tonight, under, up, view, watch, when, while, wish, wonderful, woods, write	Nouns (34); Verbs (21); Adjectives (15); Adverbs (15); Others (10)
K2	beef, bunch, decorate, duck, elder, email, example, fantastic, fruit, including, pen, relaxed, restaurant, rice, salad, sausages, skirt, tomatoes	Nouns (13); Verbs (2); Adjectives (3)
K3+	curry, dumplings, ham, mat, pond, pork, robot, snacks, soda, spicy, yummy	Nouns (9); Adjectives (2)

Features of Writing at the Word, Clause, and Text levels

The high- and low-achieving students demonstrated differences in their writing at the word, clause, and text levels. First, at the word level, the low-achievers appeared to have more difficulties in spelling. For some words misspelt, the reader could still guess what the student meant. For example, Student 1 wrote “wensday”, “tomoro”, and “brig” in Figure 1, which should be “Wednesday”, “tomorrow”, and “bring”. However, in the other piece of writing, i.e., the email/letter, the spelling mistakes could influence the intelligibility of the writing. The student wrote that s/he “raed” a “Txie” (should be Taxi) to go shopping and wanted to buy some “figer”. It was unclear what “raed” and “figer” meant or what words the student

intended to produce. The high-achieving students also made occasional spelling mistakes, but they were mostly intelligible through guessing. For example, student 3 wrote “aroud” and “snank” (Figure 2), which could be relatively easily interpreted as “around” and “snack”.

Analysis on the word level also revealed that the high-achieving students used more words in different parts of speech, complementing what was found earlier in the vocabulary profile analysis. For example, Student 2 used some adjectives such as “new”, “yummy”, “relaxed”, and “tired” (should be “tiring”), and adverbs such as “tomorrow”, “also”, and “then”. In contrast, low-achieving students used fewer adjectives and adverbs. Student 1, for instance, only used “exciting” (should be “excited”), and “so” and “out” (although they were not accurately used to mean far away from the shore).

Email/letter	<p>Sunday, I with my old friend will go shopping. I was very exciting to goes.</p> <p>Today, is sunday need to go shopping. we raed a Txie go. I saw the shopping room, and I run there. I want to buy some pet and peter book. My friend said, I want to buy some figer. finish shopping we go home by sefh.</p>
Story	<p>wensday, my family tomoro said, go pack and eat some or swim.</p> <p>We need to brig some food and drinks, I get some apples, sawich, banana and water. My mom say, if you two need to swim, don,t swim so out. Ok, is time to go, let go. I saw a tree and I go there with my famolly. we eat and swim.</p>

Misspellings in bold

Figure 1. Writing by Student 1 (low-achieving).

Email/letter	<p>Dear Karen</p> <p>I want to meet you in the shopping mall tomorrow aroud half past one in the afternoon. We can buy some new clothes, some yummy candies and also a new smartphone. Hope you can come.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Your friend Yannis Leung (Saturday) 13th November, 21</p>
Story	<p>Today is Saturday, Mom and dad bring us to the park to have a picnic.</p> <p>First, we pack our fruit and snank. Then, I pack a mat, swim suit and drinks. At last, we take our bags to the car and drive to the park.</p> <p>When we get there, we eat our yummy snacks, fruit and drinks first. Then, when we are full we went for a swim. I feel relaxed when I swim.</p> <p>Today was a tired day, I hope next time can be more relaxed than this time.</p>

Misspellings in bold

Figure 2. Writing by Student 2 (high-achieving).

At the clause and text levels, the low-achieving students used very limited number of connectives to link up ideas in different clauses. For example, without the use of temporal connectives, the flow of the story was not always clear, and the sequence of events was expressed poorly as in “Ok, is time to go, let go.”

(Figure 1). Student 3, another low-achiever, provided another example of how the use of connectives was limited (see Figure 3). The student only used the additive connective “and” throughout the two writing. In contrast, the high-achieving students demonstrated the use of connectives to link clausal units. The writing of Student 4, a high-achieving student, shows how various connectives were used to describe a sequence of events in the story (see Figure 4). For example, “first”, “next”, “finally”, and “in the end” were used. Other connectives included the causal connective “so” and additive connective “and”. The student also used “because” in the email/letter. Similarly, the writing of Student 2 presented above showed the use of a number of connectives used, including “and”, “also”, “first”, “then”, and “at last”.

Email/letter	Me and my friend go shopping today. We meet in the shopping mall. We meet at about 5:30 p.m. I like to buy some toys. I am so glad.
Story	today me and my friends go to the beach, I am happy. we go swiming in the sea and we eat some food. I like the brand and meat. I am so glad. I hope I can come hear next time.

Misspellings in bold

Figure 3. Writing by Student 3 (low-achieving).

Email/letter	Dear Pat: I want to me you at Happy Park at night because I want to buy a packet of potato chips, a loaf of bread, a carton of milk and a tin of fish. By Rainie
Story	One day, Ben, Lily, Mum and Dad felt bored, so they went to the woods to have a picnic. First, they pack the bags full of fruits. Then, they went to the woods. Next, they took the fruits out of the bag and ate them. Finally, they got hot. ‘I want to go to that lake to swim!’ said Ben pointing at the lake. ‘Sure.’ said Mum. In the end, they went back home by bus.

Misspelling in bold

Figure 4. Writing by Student 4 (high-achieving).

At the text level, the low-achievers demonstrated a lack of genre awareness. As shown in Student 5’s writing (Figure 5), the email/letter and the story were written in an almost identical way, which started with “Today” to narrate what happened. This lack of genre awareness was also evident in the writing of low-achieving students presented above (Figure 1 and 3). Student 1 also started the email/letter and the story similarly (using “Sunday” and “wensday” respectively). Student 3 did not seem to be aware that the genre of letter/email required a greeting line of “Dear Pat”, and a signing off at the end.

In contrast, the high-achieving students showed how they were cognizant of the genre by including the greeting line and writing their name in closing in a letter/email (see Figure 2 and 4). They were also following some conventions of how letters are structured by aligning the greeting line to the left and signature to the right. In addition, the high-achieving students showed more awareness of the story genre by considering the development of the plot through the use of temporal connectives, as mentioned above. There was a generally clear orientation and/or coda. For instance, Student 2 ended the story mentioning

that the day was a tired (tiring) day, and how s/he hoped the trip can be more relaxed (relaxing) the next time (see Figure 2). Student 4 ended the story with an “in the end” line (see Figure 4). An additional example can be shown in Figure 6, with the high-achieving student starting the story mentioning having a picnic yesterday and how s/he felt excited before the picnic, and ending it with a comment: “It was a fantastic day”.

Email/letter	Today, I amd my friends go to the shopping. We meet in the my home in the nine o’ O. We buy a apple, banana, a tin of nuts, a paket of potato chip and a loaf of bread.
Story	Today, we go to a park to camp. We take a lot of foot . We take a apply , banana and some cake. In the park, we eating a lot of food. We see some X go to siwn .

Misspellings in bold

Figure 5. Writing by Student 5 (low-achieving).

Email/letter	Hi Ben we will shopping tomorrow. We will meet at Mong Kok. We go there by MTR. I will buy some shoes for my mum and dad. How about you? Please write soon by Pen Friend Jayden
Story	I had a pinic yesterday. We prepared a lot of foods and drinks. I felt exicted because I never had a pinic before. We went to a Country Park to have pinic . We ate a lot of foods. Example sandwiches, tomatoes and salad. I felt happy because the view was great. We saw a pond next to us so I and sister to swim at the pond and we saw a duck so we throw some bread to it. We felt wonderful because we can feed the duck. It was a fantastic day.

Misspelling in bold

Figure 6. Writing by Student 6 (high-achieving).

Summing up the findings, the high-achieving and low-achieving students differed in the ways shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Differences in the Writing by High- and Low-Achieving Students

	High-achieving students	Low-achieving students
Word level	More K1 words in emails/letters	Fewer K1 words in emails/letters
	More K1, K2, and K3+ words in stories	Fewer K1, K2, and K3+ words in stories
	Lexically richer in general; able to use nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs	Using mostly nouns
	Fewer spelling mistakes, and mostly intelligible	Many spelling mistakes, some unintelligible
Clause level	A lot of different connectives used, including temporal, causal, and additive connectives	(very) Few connectives used, and generally only additive connectives
Text level	Greater genre awareness, e.g., starting an email/letter with a greeting line and ending it with the name of the writer; story showing the development of the plot, and with proper opening and closing	Lower genre awareness, e.g., email/letter and story started and ended in very similar ways

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite its exploratory nature, this study made the first attempt to investigate primary school EFL learners' writing at the word, clausal, and text levels altogether. At the word level, echoing previous studies (Bae & Lee, 2012), young learners' vocabulary knowledge (mainly spelling accuracy and productive vocabulary profiles) can distinguish high-achieving from low-achieving writers. Our findings indicated that high-achievers produced fewer spelling mistakes, employed more K1 words, and adopted a wider range of vocabulary which contributed to writing quality.

Specifically, the high-achievers used more K1, K2 and K3+ words in stories than the low-achievers did. The finding implies that the high-achievers were competent of employing not only high-frequency words but less-frequent ones in writing. In comparison, in letters, more K1 words were used by high-achievers whereas the occurrences of K2 and K3+ words were similar. Compared with stories, personal letters are more related to everyday communication and thus the learners were using more high-frequency words. The higher frequency of K1 words in high-achievers' writing also indicates their richer vocabulary knowledge.

Furthermore, the writing competence of the high-achievers can also be reflected in the wider range of word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives). Children often acquire nouns earlier than verbs (Tardif et al., 1997). Therefore, the high-achieving learners seemed to reach a more advanced stage of vocabulary learning than low-achievers. Besides, at the orthographic level, more accurate word spelling leads to better writing (Bae & Lee, 2012). It seems that high-achievers obtained richer knowledge of grapheme-phoneme principles when spelling and thus their errors (e.g., "aroud") can still be intelligible (He & Wang, 2009). In comparison, it is hard to figure out some words in low-achievers' writing (e.g. "raed") which negatively affected the comprehensibility of their writing.

More connectives were found in high-achievers' writing than that produced by low-achievers. This finding not only implies high-achievers' richer vocabulary knowledge but suggests the establishment of cohesion and coherence in writing. Although we did not delve into the accurate use or over-use of connectives in-depth (which could be a limitation), the general finding that the high-achievers used connectives to achieve the purpose of, for instance, the development of the plot, revealed their better organisation. Moreover, at the text level, the high-achievers seemed to be more aware of the features of the genres and the texts were better structured. Mastery of lower-order skills (e.g., accurate word choice) can free up working memory space so that writers can shift their attention to higher-order skills, such as idea generation and text revision. The high-achievers, who performed better in spelling and vocabulary profiles, might have shifted their attention to establishing text cohesion and attended to the organisation following the genre structures. These speculations, however, need to be supported by interview data revealing writers' awareness and attention. Finally, it is not surprising that the high-achievers produced longer texts than their

peers in the tasks because text length has been found to be a valid predictor for young learners' L2 writing proficiency (Bae & Lee, 2012).

Pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings. Although the high-achievers and low-achievers receive the same instruction, differences exist concerning all the levels of word, clause, and text. (E)FL teachers may evaluate vocabulary use (including spelling) and connectives, and learners' genre awareness in order to distinguish high-achievers from low-achievers. More support can be provided to develop low-achievers' writing proficiency. These learners may need more explicit instruction on the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge and practise word spelling based on the grapheme-phoneme principles of word formation. Teacher feedback on the writing of low-achievers may particularly focus on proper connective use and logical content organisation so as to raise their awareness of cohesion and genre.

Notwithstanding the contributions, this study also bears two limitations. First, given the length of texts (33-65 words), we could not perform quantitative analyses on the clausal and textual levels of the writing. This might affect the results and could be avoided in future research when longer texts (e.g., 100 words) are collected. However, in our qualitative findings, we did reveal the features represented by at least half of the students, rendering them more salient differences between high- and low-achieving students. Second, the sample size was small and only a few indicators were selected to measure the quality of the writing. These may also exert an influence on the generalisability of the findings.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study highlight the distinctive features of high-achieving young EFL writers and strengthen the necessity of future research exploring competent young L2/EFL writers' output. It is recommended that larger-scale studies with more texts and covering more measurements can be conducted to provide a holistic picture of young learners' writing. Raters' scores can also be collected to compare with the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the written discourse.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the children participants and assistants who were involved in this project. Our thanks also go to the editor(s) and reviewers for their time and comments. The project was funded by Language Learning Early Career Research Grant awarded to the second and corresponding author.

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(Received June 30, 2023; Revised October 30, 2023; Accepted December 10, 2023)