

Greetings in Letters by EFL Primary School Children. A Longitudinal Study

ROSA MARÍA JIMÉNEZ CATALÁN

Universidad de La Rioja

rosa.jimenez@unirioja.es

In this study we look at the use of salutations and valedictions in letters by primary school learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Second language discourse studies have paid relatively little attention to the structural and pragmatic aspects of letter writing by university EFL learners. However, obligatory greetings in letters have been superficially addressed in research, hidden among other aspects. Likewise, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies to help understand how, over time, EFL learners (and in our case primary school students) develop discourse and pragmatic competence in letter writing, particularly with regard to its most distinguishable features: salutations and valedictions. In the present study we traced individual learners' performance over three school years in order to identify patterns of use and developmental tendencies. The findings suggest the existence of stages of development in the use of greetings. In the process of acquisition, salutations come first and in many cases they are overextended to fulfil the functions of complimentary closings. Finally, the analysis of greetings uncovers children's personal/individual voices and identities and reveals how children perceive their addressees.

Keywords: greetings; letters; discourse development; pragmatic development; primary school EFL learners

Los saludos en las cartas de aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera en educación primaria. Un estudio longitudinal

En este estudio analizamos el uso de los saludos y las despedidas en cartas escritas por escolares de educación primaria, aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los estudios de discurso en segundas lenguas han prestado una atención relativa a aspectos estructurales y pragmáticos de cartas escritas por aprendices de inglés de nivel universitario. Sin embargo, los saludos

obligatorios en las cartas se han investigado muy superficialmente, diluidos entre otros aspectos de las cartas. Asimismo, no existen estudios longitudinales que puedan ayudarnos a entender el modo en que los aprendices de inglés en educación primaria desarrollan la competencia discursiva y pragmática en las cartas, particularmente en lo que respecta a sus rasgos más distintivos como son el uso de los saludos y las despedidas. En el presente estudio analizamos estas fórmulas a lo largo de tres cursos a fin de identificar patrones de uso. Los resultados sugieren la existencia de estadios de desarrollo en los saludos. En el proceso de adquisición, los saludos emergen primero y en muchos casos se observa una generalización de los mismos para cumplir funciones de despedida. Finalmente, en el análisis emergen las voces e identidades de los niños y se observa cómo perciben a los destinatarios de la carta.

Palabras clave: saludos y despedidas; cartas; desarrollo de la competencia discursiva; desarrollo de la competencia pragmática; aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera; educación primaria

1. INTRODUCTION

Letter writing is important in foreign language education, where it is used not only to help learners develop expertise in writing, but also to encourage them to express their ideas and feelings.¹ In the age of emails, SMS and WhatsApp messages, letter writing exercises continue to be included in foreign language textbooks, writing guides, language courses and examinations, for instance, the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET), as well as in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, letter writing is not only a common pedagogical task in language education but also an act of social practice: when students write a letter, they engage in interaction with a real or imagined audience, and when they use a conventional politeness formula to acknowledge the audience of that letter, such as the *salutation* (the greeting which precedes the body of the letter) or a *valediction* (the complimentary closing or signoff which follows it), the formula employed can reflect the extent to which they have assimilated the linguistic, discursive and social norms of the target language as well as how much distance they perceive to exist between themselves and their addressees.

Inspired by Gumperz's ([1968] 2009) notion of speech community, we suggest that foreign language learners, including learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), form such a community for the following reasons: first, because they share a social setting, i.e., the foreign language classroom; second, because of the existence of commonalities in the interlanguages of EFL learners all over the world. As noted by Ellis (1994), second language acquisition (SLA) research has shown such commonalities in the acquisition of morphological, syntactic, pragmatic and discourse competence by English learners with different mother tongues and in different learning contexts. However, most research has looked at university students, and has been predominantly cross-sectional in nature. Only a few longitudinal studies, generally based on a relatively small number of learners, have been published to date (e.g., Cekaite 2007; Li and Schmitt 2008; Shively 2011; Barón 2015), though these studies have neither focused on children nor on letter writing. Despite the fact that letter writing is a common pedagogical task in foreign language classrooms, there is no research on whether young learners use obligatory elements such as greetings following the specific genre of the letter, and if they do, which elements emerge first, or what this reflects about children's knowledge of the letter as structured discourse. In an attempt to narrow this gap, the present study focuses on the emergence of salutations and valedictions in English letters of primary EFL learners. We aim to ascertain whether a large sample of Spanish primary school children use some of the most salient conventionalities in letters such

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as salutations and valedictions, and if so, whether there is an increase in the number of students who use them as time goes on. We also aim to identify the forms of salutations and valedictions appearing in the letters and trace patterns of development in the use of these obligatory elements over time.

Our study is framed within second language (L2) discourse studies, and within this, on children's letter writing as a genre (see Barton and Hall 1999; Bruce 2014). However, as already mentioned, letter writing is also a social activity in which learners engage in order to communicate meaning, adopt the role of addressor and reflect their perceptions and identities by means of discourse devices; among which are the greetings they use, misuse or omit in opening and closing their letters. Our review aims to take this interdisciplinary view of letters, thus discourse analysis, genre, politeness and identity coincide to provide the theoretical and empirical background of our study.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Letters in L2 discourse studies

The study of letter writing has a sound tradition in discourse studies (Askehave and Swales 2001; Bhatia 2004; Hyon 2011). However, it was not until the 1990s that applied linguistics researchers cast their eye towards letters written by EFL learners. The majority of these studies aimed to compare the letter writing performance of university EFL or other second language learners to that of native speakers (e.g., Maier 1992; Sims and Guice 1992; Al-Khatib 2001; Smith 2005; Arvani 2006). It is, however, difficult to draw general conclusions due to the great disparity of research topics addressed in the comparisons. For instance, Smith (2005) investigated the awareness of writing conventions in the first and in the second language (L1 and L2) of Chinese and Arabic EFL learners, and found that both groups accommodate to the norms of their L1. Al-Khatib (2001) looked at the effect of culture on the use of salutations and valedictions as markers of politeness in letters by Jordanian EFL learners. His results are of particular interest for the present study as he found a high proportion of students (65%) using Jordanian Arabic-style salutations and valedictions rather than those of the target language and culture. In another study, on business English, Arvani (2006) found similar sequences in letters by L1 and L2 speakers. However, the greetings used by the second group were more informal than required by the context, evidencing lack of awareness of the best vocabulary and phraseology to use to construct a letter appropriate to a given situation. Conversely, Maier (1992) found that non-native speakers overused politeness strategies in their salutations and valedictions. Similar results were obtained by Sims and Guice (1992) in their study of native and non-native speakers' enquiry letters requesting information and application forms from an American university; specifically, non-native speakers exaggerated politeness in valedictions, writing for instance "Very respectfully yours" rather than "Yours."

This lack of attention to EFL letter writing by discourse studies, and the lack of longitudinal data on young EFL learners in this respect is unfortunate since, as has been mentioned and is expanded upon in the next section, salutations and valedictions are not only obligatory elements in the structure of letters but also carriers of social and pragmatic functions.

2.2. The functions of salutations and valedictions

In discourse studies, salutations and valedictions are part of the idiosyncratic features of a letter. There may be variation in the purpose or the medium of transmission of a letter, but the letter is always recognised as an example of the “letter genre” thanks to its “three-move discourse structure” comprising salutation, body and valediction or “complimentary closing” (Bhatia 2004, 16). Salutations and valedictions are realised through different formulae, the options being determined by the situation as well as by the social distance between addressor and addressee.

In addition to the obvious function of opening or closing an interaction, salutations and valedictions play two social functions: they serve to acknowledge the presence of the interlocutor(s) and to show good manners and concern towards them. The omission of salutations and valedictions in letters might be perceived by the addressee as a lack of acknowledgment and, in consequence, as intrusive and impolite behaviour. We find support for this claim in the model of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which views politeness as the capacity of human beings to control inner aggression and preserve face. In this model, politeness formulae such as greetings exist in all cultures and have the functions of avoiding threat, establishing and strengthening relations, and showing respect to addressees. Following this argument, we may consider salutations and valedictions both to constitute greetings and function as markers of politeness, a view shared by many scholars in various linguistic disciplines. For instance, within sociolinguistics, Holmes (1994) considers greetings examples of positive polite behaviour or indicators of positive polite intent. Likewise, Laver (1981), in his study of conversational routines, and more recently Kuiper (2004) in his study of formulaic performance in conventionalised varieties of speech, also views greetings in the role of markers of politeness. Finally, from an ethnographic standpoint, Duranti (2009) notes the significant role played by greetings in communicative competence, and their relation to society and social practice: far from being meaningless formulae, greetings reveal aspects of a culture through the different types of encounters where they occur. Duranti considers three conditions necessary in the study of greetings: an ethnographic approach, a record of what was actually said in the encounter, and a working definition of the phenomenon under investigation.

While the views on greetings summarised above actually refer to oral interaction, the assumptions underlying each view can, in our opinion, readily be transferred to the analysis of greetings in letters. This claim is based on three grounds. First, letters

are social in nature (Barton and Hall 1999), including those written in the foreign language classroom. Second, EFL learners form a distinct community of English users, and as such, it is possible, echoing Duranti, to look at what they actually say or write as uniquely reflective of their communal characteristics. Third, letters as examples of social interaction reflect how addressors perceive their addressee in terms of social distance. Furthermore, closely related to social distance is the concept of “rapport,” or degree of agreement or understanding among the participants in a given social interaction. According to Spencer-Oatey (2000, 11-16), rapport is based on the interrelation of five domains: the speech act, discourse, participants, stylistics and non-verbal aspects. Spencer-Oatey’s concept fits well with the idea of the letter as a type of social interaction, where the speech act of greeting is realised and where addressors project their own values and expectancies in the way they accommodate to the addressees.

Given the social nature of letters, the functions played by salutations and valedictions, and their obligatory status in letters, a longitudinal study seems to be necessary to expand our knowledge of how primary school children acquire and develop aspects of lexical, discourse and pragmatic competence in L2. Unfortunately, there is, as mentioned above, a surprising scarcity of research in this area. For instance, in a detailed review of SLA research in children, Pinter (2011) summarises over thirty studies, only two of which focused on writing, and neither on letter writing. To our knowledge, the only study devoted to the analysis of letters by young EFL learners is the one conducted by Lindgren and Stevenson (2013) with Swedish children. However, its focus differs from the present study as the authors examined the interactional resources used by Swedish children to communicate meaning in letters written in L1 (Swedish) and in L2 (English). Research is also scarce in the area of English L1 letter writing, and the few studies published differ in focus. For instance, some studies have looked at content in letters to Santa Claus written by American English speaking children (Caron and Ward 1975; Richardson and Simpson 1982; Downs 1983), and of these, two were concerned with the effect of gender on the content of children’s letters (Richardson and Simpson 1982; Downs 1983). The only study we are aware of that has examined greetings in English speaking children’s L1 letters was the study conducted by Crowhurst (1990). However, her study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, and the aim was to ascertain how sixth-year Anglophone Canadian children perceived their addressees when writing letters to student teachers. That said, in her analysis, she did also look at the use of greetings as discourse moves and markers of politeness. In this regard, the most relevant findings were the omission of salutations and the ending of the letters in an awkward way. According to Crowhurst’s report, the writers were “plunging immediately into the first topic, and many ended abruptly once they had dealt with their last topic” (1990, 13).

As Lindgren and Stevenson (2013, 391), echoing Harklau (2011), note “the study of young second language writers’ texts is just emerging as a field of enquiry.” In our view, it seems crucial to conduct a longitudinal study in order to ascertain whether

EFL children, in their initial stages of letter writing, will show similar or different patterns to those reported in L2 letters by adult EFL learners in discourse studies, or to L1 English children, as reported in the study by Crowhurst (1990). To this end, we set out to investigate the following research questions:

Question one: Will Spanish primary school children employ salutations and valedictions when writing a letter in English? If so, will the number of students who use both greetings increase over time?

Question two: What forms of salutations and valedictions do EFL primary school children use?

Question three: What patterns of development emerge in these children's use of salutations and valedictions over three school years?

3. METHOD AND PROCEDURES

3.1. Participants

Our study is based on a corpus of 630 letters written by a cohort of 210 Spanish primary school EFL learners over a period of three school years. The distribution by sex/gender was 105 girls and 105 boys; ages ranged from nine to twelve. The sample is made up of complete classes from four primary schools with similar socio-cultural characteristics located in middle-class areas of a city in northern Spain. The sample was also homogeneous in terms of the learners' family language background, as the vast majority of the students had been born in the same region where the schools were located, and all were from Spanish L1 families.

The learning context of the sample of learners participating in this study presents similar characteristics with respect to grade, the status held by English in the schools, teaching approach, number of hours of instruction and syllabus content, all of which are regulated by national and regional law. Thus, English is taught as a foreign language for three to four hours per week depending on the grade and it is a compulsory foreign language in primary education, being taught throughout the six grades that make up the primary school curriculum (for six to twelve-year-olds). At the end of their fourth year of primary education students in all the participating schools will have received approximately 400 hours of English instruction, 520 by the end of their fifth year, and 649 by the end of their sixth year and thus the end of primary school. According to national and regional law, a communicative approach must be adopted throughout primary education, with the emphasis on oral skills and the gradual introduction of writing activities. To help learners develop the latter, the personal letter is among the tasks employed.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The participants were asked to complete a biographical questionnaire and to write a letter in English introducing themselves and talking about their town, school and

hobbies. The learners performed the same task at three collection times, in the fourth, fifth and sixth year, after having been given instructions in English and Spanish about the context and the purpose of the task and the fictional recipients: they were supposedly to be going to spend a month in Oxford with an English family consisting of four members: the parents (Mr and Mrs Edwards), a daughter (Helen) and a son (Peter).

The task was conducted simultaneously in all four schools by our research team in the presence of the teachers. Next, the letters from each study year were coded and transcribed to computer text files by members of our team, after which we identified and manually extracted data on all salutations and valedictions and recorded them in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Any doubt as regards the interpretation of the children's writing was resolved by discussion among the team and a final agreement reached. Four categories were coded for: (1) salutation + valediction, (2) salutation only, (3) valediction only, (4) neither salutation nor valediction. For the purpose of the present study, the transcriptions of the letters preserved the learners' original text, including errors.

3.3. Reference guides

In conducting the identification, classification and labelling of salutations and valedictions we followed Cory (1999) and Cullen and O'Donoghue (2005). Tables 1 and 2 below include two lists of salutations and valedictions drawn from these sources. As can be observed, we have classified them within a continuum ranging from most informal to most formal and have illustrated each form with a brief description of the situation in which it is appropriate. This description is based on the recommendations for use provided by the above reference guides.

Table 1. Forms of salutation included in reference guides

FORM	SITUATION
Hi/Hey	E-mails and letters to friends (esp. American)
Hello	Friends or relatives
Dear + person's given name: <i>Dear Peter</i> Dearest/My dearest	Friends or relatives, or people we know fairly well Showing affection
Dear + person's first name and surname: <i>Dear Mary Smith</i>	A stranger or a person the writer does not know
Dear + person's title + surname: <i>Dear Mr Blair</i> , <i>Dear Mrs/Ms Blair</i> , <i>Dear Mr and Mrs Blair</i>	A person the writer does not know well A person whose title the writer wishes to reflect for politeness purposes
Dear Sir(s), Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Madam	A person whose name is not known

Similar to salutations, the choice of valediction is determined by the degree of familiarity and affection that exists between the addressor and the addressee. As in the salutations above, the list of valedictions compiled in Table 2 will serve as a framework for understanding learners' performance. Compared with salutations, English valedictions come in a wider range of forms. This may result in greater difficulty for the learner, as there is little correspondence between the form of the salutation adopted and that of the valediction.

Table 2. Forms of complimentary valedictions included in reference guides

FORM	SITUATION
Love With love and best wishes	Close friends or relatives
Lots of love With all my love Much love	Close friends or relatives; more affectionate
XXX, XOXO	People you love or feel affection towards (The Xs represent kisses and the Os represent hugs)
Take care	Close friends or relatives; showing interest in the person's status or condition
See you / See you soon Cheers / Bye for now	Familiar
Best wishes / With best wishes All the best	Friends and family (but also people you do not know well)
Yours	Someone you know less well
Regards	People you know or work with but who are not family or close friends
Yours faithfully (British)	Formal letters: Letters beginning with "Dear Sir," "Dear Madam"
Yours sincerely, Sincerely (British)	Formal letters: Letters beginning with "Dear Mr..." or "Dear Ms..."
Yours truly (American)	Formal letters: Letters beginning with "Dear Mr..." or "Dear Ms..."

4. FINDINGS

In section 4.1 we will look at the number of learners who included or not salutations and valedictions, describe the forms most frequently used over the three-year period, and compare them to the forms listed in Tables 1 and 2. Then, in section 4.2 we will focus on those learners who used both a salutation and a valediction at each of the three collection times (in the fourth, fifth and sixth year). The purpose here is to identify common tendencies that may confirm that developmental patterns in the use of salutations and valedictions may serve as evidence for the development of the elements of discourse competence.

4.1. Frequencies and patterns of use

Research question number one set out to investigate whether Spanish primary school children would employ salutations and valedictions when writing a letter in English, and if so, to find out whether the number of students who used both greetings would increase over time. Table 3 indicates that four different trends exist and can be used to divide participants into four groups. First, over half of the participants in each year began their letters with a salutation but did not end them with a standard valediction. Second, the omission of both a salutation and a valediction was observed in some learners in each of the three years. Third, a small number of learners made use of both a salutation and a valediction at all three collection times. Finally, a small percentage of learners used a valediction but not a salutation. Despite this generally bleak picture, progress in the use of salutations and valedictions is evident, particularly if we compare learners' fourth year performance with their sixth, where we note not only a higher number of students using both salutation and valediction, but also a sharp decrease in those not using either.

Table 3. Trends regarding the use of salutations and valedictions over the three school years

SCHOOL YEAR	BOTH SALUTATION AND VALEDICTION	SALUTATION ONLY	VALEDICTION ONLY	NEITHER SALUTATION NOR VALEDICTION
Fourth	4.8%	52.5%	1.4%	41.3%
Fifth	18.1%	54.3%	3.8%	23.8%
Sixth	26.7%	61.4%	1.9%	10.0%

The significance of differences across the three years was assessed by means of Friedman's ANOVA, a non-parametric test which makes no assumptions about the distribution of the data and is based on the ranking of the three test scores for each student. These results are shown in Table 4. It can be seen that the mean rank decreases—hence the incidence of use of greetings increases—from one year to the next, and that there is a highly significant difference across the scores for the three years: $p = .000$, or, using the commonly employed convention of three significance bands, $p < .001$.

Table 4. Friedman's anova: main test

SCHOOL YEAR	MEAN RANK
Fourth	2.32
Fifth	2.00
Sixth	1.68

$\chi^2(2) = 70.12, p = .000$

As the Friedman test shows, there is a significant difference across the three years as a whole, comparisons of the values for all possible pairs of years were also calculated, and are shown in Table 5. It can be seen that the differences are significant for all pairs of years (between fourth and sixth at the $p < .001$ level, and for the others the $p < .01$ level), although the test tells us nothing about the size of that difference. This is given by the effect sizes, which are also included in Table 5, and indicate that the effect is small for year-on-year results, but it is greater when performance separated by two years (fourth and sixth year results) are considered.

Table 5. Friedman's ANOVA: pairwise comparisons

YEARS COMPARED	SIGNIFICANCE VALUE (p)	ASSOCIATED EFFECT SIZE (r)
Fourth and fifth	.003	.13 (small effect)
Fifth and sixth	.004	.13 (small effect)
Fourth and sixth	.000	.26 (small to medium effect)

We now turn to the second research question, in which we aimed to identify the specific formulae adopted by the participants for their salutations and valedictions. We conducted this analysis by identifying the forms of greetings appearing in the letters, reporting their occurrence across the total corpus, and looking for trends.

4.1.1. Salutations

In descending order of frequency, the salutation forms appearing at the three collection times are as follows: "Hello," "Dear {_____}" and "Hi." As Table 6 shows, the frequency of each form varies according to the collection time. For instance, "Dear" is rather infrequent in fourth year but has almost doubled by fifth and tripled by sixth. Nevertheless, its use continues to be rather low in comparison to "Hello," which is preferred by around half the students at each test time, while use of "Hi" is marginal across the whole corpus.

Table 6. Distribution of salutations by EFL learners by school year

n 210	DEAR	HELLO	HI
Fourth	7.1%	49.5%	0.9%
Fifth	13.3%	57.6%	0.9%
Sixth	19.5%	59.5%	3%

The frequencies indicate that participants prefer the moderately informal "Hello" to either the formal "Dear" or the very informal "Hi" in each of the three years, though its use slightly increases over time. Examples 1, 2 and 3 illustrate this tendency. All

examples are original extracts from the letters, though personal names have been changed to preserve anonymity. The abbreviations in parentheses have the following meanings: deleted name of the student's town of residence or any personal information (xxx), student (S), boy (b), girl (g), fourth year primary (4P), fifth year (5P) and sixth year (6P).

- (1) **Hello** my name is Charlie. My *ciudad* [town] is xxx. (S5b4P)
- (2) **Hello!** Mr. and Mrs Edwards. I'm Julia and I live in xxx. (S210g5P)
- (3) **Hello family!!** My name is Berta and surname is Santos. (S1g6P)

4.1.2. Valedictions

Several tendencies emerge in the valediction data: the use of conventional formulae, the use of parting formulae from speech as distinct from valedictions in written letters, such as "Goodbye" or "Bye," and the strategy of signing off by name or surname. Although not a valediction, it is worth noting the tendency to end the letter by interrupting its flow or "narrative," without any preliminary move. In our view, this completes the picture of what EFL school children do and don't do when closing their letters at early stages of English language learning. Examples 4 to 7 illustrate each tendency.

- (4) I'm playing Basketball with xxx and xxx are very good play of basketball See you soon. Marta. (S32gP6)
- (5) My cat is very beautiful and smoll [small]. He is white and borwn [brown]. My family is very happy. **Goodby** [bye]. (S241bP5)
- (6) I like cycling with my family. In weekend I go to mountain and sea. I don't like rain. **Sandra**. (S99gP5)
- (7) My house is big and have a: bhatroon [bathroom], dining room, bedroom, kitchen and living room. **I like my house, my friends and my family**. (S225bP5)

As far as conventional formulae are concerned, Table 7 displays those appearing at each test time with number of users in parentheses. As can be observed, there is an increase in the use of each formula and also an increase in the number of formulae used over time. Despite this increase, however, the number of learners using standard valedictions remains small compared to the total sample.

Table 7. Distribution of conventional valedictory formulae

SCHOOL YEAR	VALEDICTORY FORMULA
Fourth	"Love" (8), "Kisses" (3), "xxx" (2)
Fifth	"Love" (24), "Kisses" (9), "XXX" (2), "Hugs and kisses" (2), "I see you" (1), "yours" (1)
Sixth	"Love" (31), "Kisses" (14), "Lot of kisses" (1), "XXX" (3), "See you soon" (3), "See you" (2), "Your friend" (3)

Despite the scarcity of learners using conventional formulae, they appear to be aware of the need to insert a salutation or valediction to accomplish the interaction. This is supported by the considerable number of learners who made use of parting formulae instead of standard complimentary valedictions: 77 learners (37%) in fourth year, 104 (50%) in fifth and 78 (37%) in sixth. Excerpts 8, 9 and 10 illustrate this tendency.

- (8) My sister is beautiful. She has got black haird [hair], blue eyes [eyes] and small nose and mouth. I like my house. **Goodbye:** Marta. (S18gP4)
- (9) My grandmother and grandfather lives in xxx. My birthday is eleven of April. **Good Be** [bye] Rebeca. (S198gP5)
- (10) My room is very beautiful there are: two beds, one computer, one play station 2, one P.S.A [. . .] **Bye,** Iñigo. (S150bP6)

Nevertheless, the awareness of the need to close letters either by a standard valediction or by other devices by no means extends to all learners. As said at the beginning of this section, the interruption of the letter without any preliminary move is also seen (examples 11 to 16), although this tendency diminishes over time:

- (11) I'm 9 year for 10 in the 18 *de* [of] April. I don't like the football. (S2gP4)
- (12) My English teacher is Edurne. She's an excellent teacher! My favourite subject is Art. (S21gP6)
- (13) I'm got [I've got] seven dogs: Pancho, Corra, Prudencio, Kira, Rosi, Sheila and Churri. My favourite season is Spring. (S52gP5)
- (14) Mi horse is blak [black] and is tall. Run very. (S157bP4)
- (15) My bedroom is big. I have got one bed, two tables, one armchair two windows and eight balls. (S5bP5)
- (16) In Holy week I'm going to go Soria and Bilbao and I'm going go out with my friend. (S7bP6).

Finally, if we compare the salutations and valedictions employed by these primary school EFL learners with those compiled from reference books, we note that the majority of informal salutations and many of the informal valedictions, but no formal ones in either case, are present in the corpus of letters. However, as noted earlier, the mere presence of a given form in a corpus does not tell us that it is being used correctly.

4.2. Developmental patterns

Knowledge of the emergence of salutations and valedictions at different stages is important in that it contributes to our understanding of how and when groups of EFL learners incorporate these specific linguistic and pragmatic features into their L2 repertoire. However, the most interesting aspect of this data is made evident on tracking

learners' individual progression (research question number three). Table 8 displays the performance of the nine learners who wrote both a salutation and a valediction at each of the three collection times. As can be seen, the use of canonical salutations and valedictions in fourth year does not presuppose their use in fifth or sixth. Furthermore, the use of a correct and appropriate form in fourth is not a predictor of its use one or two years later. This finding is in line with the results obtained by Li and Schmitt (2009) in their longitudinal case study of a Chinese university student's use of lexical phrases in English compositions. That is, they found a gradual increase in the range of new lexical phrases but also continued inconsistencies with native use, reflected in the overuse of some phrases.

Table 8. A longitudinal view of learners' individual progress in the use of salutations and valedictions

STUDENT	SCHOOL YEAR	SALUTATION	VALEDICTION
S92b	Fourth	Hello my name is Alvar.	I love, Alvar [Love]
	Fifth	Hello: Peter and Helen. My name is Alvar Ortega.	Alvar Ortega
	Sixth	Hello! My name's Alvar.	Bye Bye
S108b	Fourth	Hello Peter, Helen, Mr. y Mrs Edwards: My name's José	Love José Amezcua
	Fifth	Hello, My name is José.	José Amezcua
	Sixth	Hello frends. My nems is José.	Good bye
S121b	Fourth	Hello: My name's Alvaro.	Love Alvaro
	Fifth	Hello, My name is Alvaro	Bye, bye. Alvaro
	Sixth	Dear Smith: I'm Pistachero.	I don't like school
S238b	Fourth	Hello, my name is Sergio	Love
	Fifth	Hello, my name is Sergio,	Good Baby [Bye]
	Sixth	Hello, my name is Sergio	Sergio
S64g	Fourth	Helou may name Sofia	XXX Keik [Kiss] Baybay [bye, bye].
	Fifth	My name is Sofia.	Sofia
	Sixth	! My name's is Sofia	happy estes [Easter] Sofia Justa
S94g	Fourth	Dear friend: My name's Lucia	Bye I love Lucia [Bye, love]
	Fifth	I am Lucia	Lucia Peña
	Sixth	¿Hello! My name's Lucy.	My friends are Luis, Ana, Jorge etc. [friends are]
S95g	Fourth	Hello my name Cristina	Bye Mrs Mr Peter and Helen Bye I love Cristina [Bye, love]
	Fifth	Hello Mr y Mrs Edwards. My name is Cristina	Bye, bye. Cristina.
	Sixth	Hello my name is Cristina Reyes	Kiss
S98g	Fourth	! My name is Macarena	It's love <i>Firma</i> Macarena [Love signed Macarena]
	Fifth	Dears Mr and Mrs Edwards and Peter and Helen: My name is Macarena	By, by family: Macarena Ruiz [Bye, bye family]
	Sixth	Dear family Edwards: Hello my name is Macarena	My teacher is <i>gripe</i> Avair [My teacher has Aviar flu]

S100g	Fourth	Oh Dear Hello. My name is Ruth Saenz Larrea.	Love Ruth
	Fifth	¡Hello! my name is Ruth Saenz Larrea.	Ruth.
	Sixth	Hellow my name is Ruth I eleven years old. Hellow Mr and Mrs. Edwards and Hellow Peters and Helen.	My grandpa played football and the hockey.

Another trend is observed in the instances of over-extension produced by learners when closing their letters. Overextension is understood here, after Field, referring to L1 acquisition (2004, 197), as follows: “In language acquisition, the use of a lexical item to refer to a wider range of entities than is normal in adult usage.” Many researchers have provided examples of lexical over-extension in children’s early words in English and Spanish as first languages (Berko Gleason 1993; Clark 1995). However, over-extension has also frequently been observed in the acquisition of English by learners from different L1 backgrounds, such as Swedish (Viberg 2002) and French and Japanese (Collins 2004). This is also true in our study; the most common over-extension instances being parting formulae used to fulfil the function of valedictions (see examples 8, 9 and 10) and, less frequently, the extension of salutations to also cover the valedictory function.

Below, examples 17 to 21 aim to illustrate this use of standard salutations to perform the valedictory function. The salutations from the same letters are provided in order to give the reader a more comprehensive view of these learners’ performance.

- (17) **Hello** family Edwards. I’m Miguel [. . .] I like spaghetti, pizza, rice, potatotes, macaroni and for drink: cola, and orange juice. **Dear: Miguel.** (S137bP6)
- (18) **Hello:** I’m Samuel A. Pérez. I’m very happy. I “ve got a present for Peter and Helen. My proposit [purpose] is learn English [. . .] **Dear Samuel: Samuel A Pérez.** (S155bP6)
- (19) **I’m Iñigo** I live in xxx [city in Spain] I’m 11 years old [. . .] My teacher of gym is Michel. **Hellow. Iñigo.** (S168bP5)
- (20) **My name is Pedro,** I live in xxx [city in Spain]. My mother is very nice and her name is Julia. My father is very big and his name is Pedro [. . .] **Hi Helen and Peter, Hi: Tomas.** (S182bP6)
- (21) **Hello,** My name is Borja. I live in a big house. The house has got five bathroom, a living-room, four betthrooms, stairs and a kitchen. I have a family [. . .] **I love Borja. Dear Ms Mrs Eduarws.** (S213bP6)

Clearly, the learners in these examples reveal knowledge of various salutations and various forms of the same salutations, but, except student 213 (example 21), who uses “I love” (“Love”) and “Dear,” we cannot be sure whether the overextension of “Dear,” “Hello” or “Hi” is due to lack of knowledge about forms of valediction or to uncertainty

as to when and how to use the correct forms. Example 21 provides evidence in this regard: the learner shows that he has incorporated “Hello,” “Dear” and “Love” into his L2 lexicon. Furthermore, his use of “I love” instead of “Love” is telling us that he has acquired not only the greeting formula but also the personal construction with the verb “To love,” but that these are somehow confused or conflicting, probably because of their similarity in form. Examples 17 and 21 also illustrate the repetition of salutations or valedictions within the same move. Repetition of forms occurs both in salutations and valedictions, and increases over time with respect to this sub-sample.

5. DISCUSSION

Salutations and valedictions can be examined from various angles, and many different approaches to their analysis could no doubt provide rich insights into our data. However, due to space constraints, analysis is restricted to the interpretation of salutations and valedictions as discourse moves—markers of politeness and symptoms of learners’ discourse and pragmatic development. In discourse and genre research, salutations and valedictions are indispensable discourse moves (that is, indispensable signals of discursive stances) from the letter-writer’s and letter-reader’s perspectives, thus their underuse and omission would be regarded as a failure to meet pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic conventions. Such failure does seem apparent in the longitudinal primary school EFL learner data presented here, and even in the few cases where both a salutation and a valediction were used, instances of inaccuracy and inappropriateness occurred. In this respect, our results differ from the finding of overuse of salutations and valedictions reported by Maier (1992) and Sims and Guice (1992), perhaps because their studies used intermediate-level university EFL students, not beginners or children. In the absence of prior research on the use of salutations or valedictions by young EFL learners, we have looked at Crowhurst’s (1990) study of Anglophone Canadian children in the sixth year of primary education, who, like the EFL children in the present study, omitted salutations and ended letters in an awkward way. Compare for instance “Some things I don’t like are liver, homework, Mondays and math.” as the ending to one native speaker letter (Crowhurst 1990, 16) with examples 17 to 21 above from our corpus. This similarity across cultures and learning contexts suggests similar processes in the acquisition of salutations and valedictions as markers of discourse and politeness in letters for English as L1 and L2 students alike.

We began this paper by asserting, after Duranti (2009) and Spencer-Oatey (2000), the potential of salutations and valedictions to convey addressors’ perceptions of and attitudes towards their addressees. This claim is supported by our data, where children reveal that they perceive the addressee, “The Edwards,” as a “close” rather than a “distant” English family. In this regard, the frequent repetition of salutations or valedictions can be understood as a token of solidarity: a manifestation of positive politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), but also, following Spencer-Oatey

(2000), as a manifestation of how children perceive their addressees and attempt to include all the members of the Edwards family in their salutations:

- (22) Dear Mrs and Mr Edwards: Hello Mr Edwards, Hello Mrs Edwards, and Peter and Helen. I Elisa Las Heras. (S193gP6)
- (23) Hello, Mr and Mrs Eduards and hello Peter and Hellen. (S211gP5)
- (24) Hello Mr. y Mrs. Edwards, hello Peter and Helen. (S217gP6)

Obviously, by canonical standards, either the omission of a salutation or valediction or the use of an informal formula or a repetition in the same move would be judged to constitute a symptom of discourse and pragmatic failure. One predictable interpretation would be that the primary school EFL learners in the study did not take into account the need to suit the formula to the situation. Supposedly, this was their first letter to an unknown English family; therefore, “Dear” and “Regards” rather than “Hello” or “Kisses” should have been more appropriate. However, even if some children were familiar with the formal formulae as indicated by the appearance of “Dear” in the corpus, most either consciously or unconsciously resorted to informal forms. As a result, we see closeness rather than distance expressed between the learners as addressors and their imagined audiences, as expected.

In addition, in their use of salutations and valedictions, we see learners displaying a positive self-image, full of optimism and warmth. This gives evidence of their desire not only to be accepted by, but also to establish friendly relations with, their addressees. As the examples below show, it is love rather than conventionalities, that primary school EFL learners seem to be most interested in.

- (25) I say good bye to you. Good Bye Mr. Edwards and Mrs. Edwards and Peter and hellen KISS FOR YOUR FAMILY GOOD BYE Nerea *FIN* [the end]. (S17gP6)
- (26) See you soon [soon]. Your friend: William. (S133bP6)
- (27) The name of my favourite friend is Carla. What's the name of your favourite friend Peter? And you Helen? Buy [Bye]: Marta. (S18gP5)
- (28) In Easter holidays I'm going to go to my village to visit my grandparent. Goodbuy [Good bye]!!! Tell me about you. (S57gP6)
- (29) xxx GOODY [Good bye]. It's love my family It's love my family It's love *Firma* [signature] Macarena. (S98gP4)

As the informants in the study were learning English in the formal context of the classroom, the logical inclination would be to attribute their poor performance to lack of adequate instruction. However, no real comment can be made on this here as, while all teachers stated that the learners had received some explicit teaching and practice in letter writing during each of the three years considered, it was unfortunately not possible for us to conduct classroom observation of learners' letter writing practices. We

cannot therefore know the exact amount and nature of the explicit instruction provided. Many studies have provided evidence of the positive effects of explicit instruction on different aspects of EFL learners' pragmatic competence, writing and lexical routines (for instance, Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Zohar and Peled 2008; Ghobadi and Fahim 2009). However, counter-evidence can also be found. For instance, in a study of the effects of instruction on university EFL learners' oral production of formulaic expressions such as "nice to see you," Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga (2012) found gains for some expressions but not for others. Likewise, with respect to lexical phrases, Li and Schmitt (2008) provided evidence that explicit instruction does not always bear fruit in learning.

In light of existing evidence on the omission and/or use of informal salutations and valedictions in letters by native English-speaking children as well as university EFL learners, the understanding of salutations and valedictions as symptoms of "transitional competence"—that is, as stages in the acquisition of the target forms (Corder 1967)—seems plausible. Through this lens, the analysis of our data reveals a gradual, unsteady progression in the participants' skill in using the native-likeness of salutations and valedictions. Over the three years, the number of learners employing salutations and valedictions together or salutations only rose; likewise there was an increase in the range of formulae used over time. Yet, even by the sixth year of primary, students did not appear to have fully assimilated the letter schema, at least not in terms of the basics of including both a salutation and a valediction.

Besides this slowness and unsteadiness, other interesting data stand out. First, salutations seem to emerge earlier than valedictions. As noted above, over half the learners made use of standard salutations, but only a small percentage employed standard valedictions. In our view, this finding can be explained on the basis of salience. Salutations occupy a predominant position in letters, being the first elements that capture addressees' attention. The use of a salutation to fill the role of a valediction may thus be reflecting a kind of metonymical thinking in children. In other words, at an early stage in the acquisition of pragmatic competence in letter writing, learners may be paying attention to its most predominant elements, such as the salutation and the content of the body of the letter. In our data, this metonymical process is evident in the over-extension of salutations to fulfil the function of valedictions but not (or only rarely) the other way round. Second, our data reveal the existence of individual variation in the process of acquiring salutations and valedictions. Even if learners share the same language-teaching/-learning experience, variation inevitably occurs.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined a longitudinal corpus of letters collected from Spanish primary school EFL learners, an overlooked age group in both L2 discourse research and SLA research generally. We aimed to ascertain whether young EFL learners included salutations and/or valedictions in their letters, and to identify patterns of use that could

provide empirical evidence of the development of these salutations and valedictions as discourse and pragmatic elements (and thus of discourse and pragmatic development more broadly). In light of our results, several conclusions can be drawn. First, primary school EFL learners underuse salutations and often omit valedictions. Furthermore, they tend to use informal formulae for both, even if there is some evidence that they might know other forms. Second, salutations emerge earlier than valedictions, perhaps revealing a reliable order effect in the acquisition of salutations and valedictions as pragmatic elements. Third, the presence of a correct and appropriate salutation or valediction on an earlier occasion does not presuppose its use, correct or otherwise, later on. Finally, as far as the use of salutations and valedictions as markers of politeness is concerned, this study has shown that by means of salutations and valedictions primary school EFL learners display their most positive face and self-concept as addressor, along with positive attitudes and feelings towards their addressees. In this sense, they are being polite in their own way, even if they do not follow the niceties of letter writing conventions. It is evident that EFL primary school children come to the classroom with their own views of the world and their own beliefs and values concerning interpersonal and social relations, and this is clearly projected in their texts.

In Spanish society, in addition to parents and siblings, the family includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, close relatives and sometimes even neighbours. Although this may nowadays be changing, making time for and maintaining strong relationships with extended family and friends are among the ideals and priorities of many Spanish people. This cultural construct is projected in the way our sample of young EFL learners greet an imagined English family. Young learners' voices and their identities as children are present in the letters they write. Although the pragmatic and communicative competence of the participants in this study was not great, they nevertheless managed to convey positive feelings and attitudes towards their addressees, although admittedly, not in a canonically or conventionally correct or appropriate way.

This study is unique in its attempt to provide a detailed account of the emergence of salutations and valedictions in letters written by primary EFL schoolchildren. Although the sample is not small and although it shares characteristics with other EFL learners in Spain and other countries where EFL is a significant part of primary education, further studies are needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the acquisition of salutations and valedictions by this group of learners. It would be useful to conduct such studies with samples of similar age and characteristics to the present one but different mother tongues. In particular, our understanding of these matters would benefit from longitudinal analyses of homogeneous samples of EFL learners, aiming to identify similarities and/or differences in the use of salutations and valedictions in the L1 and in the L2. These studies should focus on letters (either in traditional or in email format) but above all on the use of salutations and valedictions in real interactions in daily life. This would allow us to ascertain whether salutations and valedictions develop in a similar fashion in a native and in a foreign language and across different

types of interactions. Also, further longitudinal studies by gender are necessary, as there is evidence of variation in letters written by males and females. Lindgreen and Stevenson (2013) reported gender differences in interactional aspects of personal letters by Swedish EFL learners: girls writing longer texts and using more emphatic elements and more affective language. While important, their study looks only at synchronic (cross-sectional) data. As they observe, some gender research scholars claim that gender is not a fixed variable, but susceptible to change over time. The present study would benefit from extended investigation to determine whether gender differences appear in interactional aspects of letters by primary school children and if they do, whether they vanish, change or remain constant over time.

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Rosa María Jiménez Catalán is Full Professor at the University of La Rioja (Spain). She has published articles and books on issues related to English language acquisition and teaching in primary and secondary school EFL learners. Her current research interests include vocabulary development, learners' lexicon, lexical availability and gender.

Address: Facultad de Letras y Educación. Departamento de Filologías Modernas. Universidad de La Rioja. C/ San José de Calasanz, s/n. 26007, Logroño, La Rioja, Spain. Tel.: +34 941299422.