

# “My friend is funny.”- Baltic Young Learners’ Use of a Number of Adjectives in Written Production of English

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## Abstract

Vocabulary is central in foreign language learning for young learners. It is therefore relevant to investigate the vocabulary produced in English by young learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The present study investigates a number of adjectives in a specific context in texts written by 12-year-olds in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. The results indicate that there is a preference for the adjective *funny* in the descriptions of a best friend so that 12-year-olds in five different countries in the Baltic Region have the same favourite of type of adjective as a lexical teddy-bear and non-native collocation together with *friend*.

**Keywords:** written production, young learners, Baltic Region, English as a foreign language, adjectives

## 1. Background

The number of children who participate in English learning programmes increases all over the world as a result of governments working on introducing English in schools at an early age. As a consequence, there is a growing interest in research on ways of improving the teaching and learning of English in primary school. There is therefore a demand for knowing more about the quality of young learners’ productive skills in English. Since school systems are organized in various ways worldwide, the terminology when describing young learners varies. Pinter categorizes young learners into three groups: pre-school (age 3-5), primary school years (age 6-12) and early adolescence (13 and onwards). The primary school years are divided into lower primary and upper primary years (2011, p.2). In the present study with material collected in the research project BYLEC (Baltic Young Learners of English Corpus), the texts were written by young learners of the upper primary years.

English is now taught at a primary school level in the five countries engaged in the BYLEC-project: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. This means that gradually the English language has taken the role as the future lingua franca in the region and thereby as the language of communication in many contexts such as trade and research. The attitude among young people to learning English is generally positive since they realize the significance of knowing English for their future careers. In a survey from 2004, it is clear that Swedish learners in the upper primary years are generally positive to learning English at school and feel that they are both motivated and interested. (Skolverket, 2004, p.46). In a study on Estonians' views on foreign language learning, the results show that Estonians understand the advantages of knowing English both for the economic growth in their country and for personal development (Fonzari, 1999). Even though these investigations come from more than ten years ago, we may expect that no great changes have occurred.

## **2. English and the Young Language Learner**

With this strong position of English as a foreign language (EFL) in many European countries, it is natural that many researchers and teachers work on finding ways of improving young learners' early acquisition of English in Europe. There is thus an interest in issues such as finding the most appropriate time to start learning English, the degree of parental involvement, finding materials that are available, and the questions regarding evaluation and assessment procedures with the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) as a framework (Council of Europe, 2001). This strong interest is shown in the vivid discussions of primary foreign language education in Europe prior to various recommendations and policy statements by the Council of Europe and the European Commission (Enever, 2011). In line with this development described above, it is natural to find out more about young learners' levels of proficiency in both the receptive and productive skills across cultures and countries in Europe.

As stated above the age factor is discussed both in terms of when to start learning the language, the procedures selected and what can be realistic demands on the young learner of different ages (Murphy, 2014). At a very young age the acquisition of vocabulary and pronunciation skills are in focus whereas further on, such as with young learners who are 12 years old, they have reached a level when they are beginning to develop the ability to "manipulate thoughts" and to "interpret and understand abstract social concepts" in their productions in a foreign language (McKay, 2006, p.7). At this age, the young learners can accordingly be expected to be mature enough to have and express opinions on matters such as human relationships and sustainable development (Sundh 2016).

## **3. Learning Vocabulary in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)**

Learners go through several stages in developing their proficiency in the foreign

language and often under influence of their first language (L1). Gradually they move on in their development to meet the demands of what is required from them in the foreign language for effective communication. Their gradual development, their interlanguage (Selinker, 1992), includes several aspects such as skills in pronunciation, syntactic structures and vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge includes collocations, idiomatic expressions and in general what is needed to produce a comprehensible and accurate production. To reach a level of expressing oneself with idiomatic wordings and collocations is described as being a characteristic of a learner who has reached far in interlanguage development and an advanced level of proficiency in the foreign language (Laufer & Waldman, 2011).

The acquisition of vocabulary starts early in foreign language learning, and vocabulary is the central part particularly for beginners and young language learners who are to build up their communicative skills. Vocabulary research suggests that a realistic target for children learning a foreign language is 500 words a year with good learning conditions (Nation, 1990). When vocabulary is taught and learnt, the traditional view in teaching vocabulary to young learners is that there is a specific order regarding the four skills and the acquisition of words: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Lado, 1964). The skill of using words in writing takes longer to develop (Webb, 2007) and implies that studies on learners' written production show their actual repertoire of vocabulary. It is argued that it is relevant to investigate learners' vocabulary since it has a strong relationship with the performance in tests of the four skills and then in particular with writing (Alderson, 2005, p.88). Learners' knowledge of vocabulary is thus important for their language use.

Knowing vocabulary in a foreign language can be categorized into three parts: form (e.g. spoken and written), meaning (e.g. concept, referents and associations) and use (e.g. grammatical functions and register) (Nation, 2001, p.27). This implies that partial knowledge of a word is possible and evident conclusions include the possible discrepancies between a learner's receptive and productive vocabulary, and furthermore, differences between lexis in the oral production of a word as opposed to the accurate use of the written form. The former is referred to as degrees of word knowledge by Melka (1997, p.88).

The adjective is a basic category of vocabulary and emerges early in the teaching of EFL for young learners. How to organize the learning of content words such as adjectives at an early stage is described in handbooks for teaching English at the A1 and A2 level (see e.g. Keaveney & Lundberg, 2014). In addition, being able to use adjectives in the three forms (the absolute, the comparative and the superlative) is claimed to be a common structure for the A2-level in contexts of teaching and learning EFL (Lundahl, 2014). Using adjectives in different forms and syntactic contexts can be demanding and several studies show the difficulties for learners in using the adjectival inflections accurately both for

young native speakers (see e.g. Selby 1972) and for students of EFL at the university level (see e.g. Al-Harafsheh, 2012; Kacani 2014). Using the inflections of adjectives accurately is thus regarded to be central in English and can cause difficulties for learners at various levels. When looking closer at adjectives, they are described in terms of lexical organisation and syntactic behaviour. In this context a distinction is made between predicative and non-predicative adjectives. In the perspective of syntactic behaviour non-predicative adjectives are not used after the verb *to be* as the verb of a sentence with examples such as *former* and *previous* whereas predicative adjectives are mainly organized into opposites with examples such as *hot/cold* and *healthy/unhealthy* (Nation, 2001, p.54).

Learning adjectives in EFL at a young age requires not only the involvement of the learners' mental processing of input but also the engagement in interpersonal activities in order to ensure that the acquisition of the words takes place. This is emphasized in a study on six Japanese six-year-olds and their acquisition of *big* and *small*. These learners' behaviour in their development of receptive and productive knowledge is described with the help of four types in a progression: (1) Repetition, as in language play and gestures; (2) Social repetition as in requests for clarification; (3) Assisted production; (4) Free production (Shintani & Ellis, 2014). Repetition and being exposed to words are thus key elements on the way to make young learners use the words in free production. The fact that young learners are repeatedly and frequently exposed is a crucial factor for young learners (Zahar, Cobb & Spada, 2001).

Not only behaviour but also learners' engagement is claimed to be significant; the more a learner engages with a word, the more likely he/she will learn it. At the start, very young language learners see vocabulary and the learning of words as their actual foreign language learning (Mihaljevic Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011). This engagement is described in terms of three components: need, search and evaluate. Need is that the learner requires the lexical item to perform a task, search is to look it up and check the meaning of it, and evaluate stands for seeing that the lexical item fits for the task in the communication (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). The effectiveness of learning words is stronger in tasks such as writing compositions than in reading tasks, the former requiring a L1-L2 look-up as opposed to a L2-L1 look-up in the latter (Hulstijn & Trompetter, 1998). Furthermore, the more words a learner knows, the easier it is to learn new words since new words share features, such as phonological, with already known words (Nation, 2001, p.43; Service, 1992).

The learner's L1 evidently plays a role in the acquisition of vocabulary in EFL and there is a consensus of this ubiquitous influence of L1 on the learning of vocabulary in L2 (see for instance Sunderman & Kroll, 2006; Swan, 1997; Ringbom, 2007). This influence may be observed in the emergence of so called false friends in the learner production. False friends are transfer errors when two words in the languages are similar in appearance but

highly different in meaning. An example of such a word is the adjective *actual* which is described as a difficulty both for Scandinavian and Russian learners of English in this respect (Swan & Smith, 2001).

Learning words in chunks and not as isolated atoms, not focusing on the individual word but rather on collocational, idiomatic and contextual use is regarded as being more beneficial and by making learners aware of the fact that words seldom occur in isolation (Kersten, 2015, p. 136). There is consequently a growing interest in studying learners’ uses of collocations either by analysing elicitation tests or production data (see e.g. Nesselhauf, 2005). Regarding production data, studies are almost exclusively on written learner language in this context and often by advanced learners since knowledge of collocations is considered to be demanding in second language production. This aspect, namely the occurrence of chunks or lexical bundles in written English was investigated in a study on the production by Lithuanian learners of different proficiency levels. The results indicate that less proficient learners’ limited lexical repertoire could be seen in the quality and quantity of the instances of lexical bundles (Juknevičienė, 2009). This study was carried out on advanced students of English but the results are nevertheless important for studies on learner language no matter the proficiency level.

#### **4. Variables of Significance and Sources for the Acquisition of Vocabulary in EFL**

The fact that the context plays an important role in second language acquisition has been recognized for a long time. External factors outside school are important to relate to in order to achieve efficient learning. These factors could be based on a psycholinguistic level with an understanding for the individual learner’s thinking as well as on a sociolinguistic one, when societal factors are taken into account. Additionally, there is also the context of the concrete classroom methodology and the school material used (Collentine & Freed, 2004). The significance of context and the role it can play in stimulating learning is emphasized in the guidelines of the curricula of English for primary school in the Swedish educational system (Skolverket, 2016).

The textbook used in the classroom as a source for the selection of words and thus the learning of vocabulary is acknowledged. Cameron discusses both vocabulary extension and repetition by working outwards from a textbook (2001, p.90). Since textbooks are considered to be used to a great extent in the language learning classroom, it is of interest to take a closer look at the vocabulary in textbooks used in upper primary school. In a study on the vocabulary in Swedish textbooks of English for this age group, the findings are that the variation is considerable in individual books, both within series and between series and that as much as one-third of the words are not among the 2,000 most frequent English words (Nordlund, 2016). In a study on the occurrence of collocations in the

exercises in the textbooks of English for the Estonian upper secondary school, the results show that lexical collocations were neglected and the selection of the collocations regarding frequency or usefulness seemed to be quite random (Vassiljev, Skopinskaja & Liiv, 2015).

But the exposure to English words is not just a matter of textbooks and exercises at school and the number of times that a word is listened to or read before it is learnt and thereby is used in writing and speaking. The fact that words are successfully picked up and acquired from a variety of sources such as songs (Madani & Nasrabadi, 2016), computer games (Ghaemi & Ebrahimi, 2015), video games (Vahdat & Rasti Behbahani, 2013) and thus not only from school material is important to consider when learners' production from different cultural and educational contexts are studied. In a study on young learners in Taiwan, the results show that games, songs, and stories have a positive effect on learning and increasing the pupils' English vocabulary (Chou, 2014). In an investigation in 2004 more than half of the Swedish learners in upper primary school expressed that they had acquired just as much or more knowledge of English from sources outside school (Skolverket, 2004, p.49).

The ways new words are presented and taught have an effect on the acquisition of vocabulary. Vocabulary clustering research tries to illuminate this field to find out about the most efficient ways of organising and learning words in a foreign language. Three types of clusters are distinguished in these studies: semantically related, thematically related and (semantically) unrelated. There is no clear agreement among researchers regarding how vocabulary is to be organized for the most successful learning since there are studies that show that semantic clustering lead to more depth and breadth in vocabulary than unrelated clustering (Hashemi & Gowdasiaei, 2005; Jullian, 2000). On the other hand there are studies that show that semantic clustering does not facilitate learning but rather the opposite (Ertin & Tekin, 2008; Karabulut & Dollar, 2016). Thematic clustering was compared with semantic clustering and no clear difference in learning outcomes could be identified (Hippner-Page, 2000). The discussion of these different results comes back to the issue whether young learners better remember distinct items than related items according to the well-established "interference theory" (McGeoch & McDonald, 1931). This theory implies that when learners are to learn new words and these words are similar to each other both in meaning (semantics) and use (syntax), it is simply hard to learn them. Since school material often is organized so that words are presented when they are semantically or thematically related (Karabulut & Dollar, 2016, p.256), it is worth considering whether this could, at least partly, explain patterns in learners' uses of English words.

The learning context thus plays a role in the acquisition process. By context is here meant the environment where language is learnt. The context is the foreign language



environment such as a classroom with formal learning and then often isolated from the culture of the foreign language. The context can also be a second language environment, such as a natural setting with informal learning. The former is definitely the most common setting for young language learners but even within this context, differences in contextual educational settings are to play a role in the skills and competences that are mastered by the young learners. This variation in learner language is due to the fact that foreign language environments may differ significantly depending on the curricula, values and traditions across classrooms. This cultural and societal diversity is worth taking into account when identifying contrasts in the language produced in foreign language environments in comparisons with language produced in second language environments. In these comparisons of language produced in foreign and second language environments, there has been evidence of so called lexical teddy bears, lexical bundles which are preferred depending on the learner group and learning context (Jantunen, 2015; Hasselgren, 1994).

To summarize, learners of English are exposed to a great number of different sources in their acquisition of vocabulary. The school context is definitely a context to consider with all the pedagogical material at hand but other sources such as international media and computer games in English are worth taking into account when studying the young learners’ uses of English words when the learners are from different cultural and language backgrounds. In this process of learning vocabulary, we may assume that learners not only learn single words but also acquire stretches of words, lexical bundles and collocations. In this acquisition of vocabulary by young learners, the adjective is a central category, along with the noun and the verb, which is concrete for the young learner to master and which plays a central role in communication. One of the questions when investigating various young learners’ vocabulary in EFL, and in this case their choice of adjectives, is whether these international sources of English influence the learners even more than school material so that we may identify an international variety of English common to them which necessarily is not close to native speakers’ English but a variety in itself.

## 5. Aims and Research Questions

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the use of English by learners of different L1 and cultural backgrounds. The interest lies in a number of adjectives selected together with the noun *friend*. The investigation provides information not only about the adjectives used with *friend* by the 12-year-olds across the five countries but also about the preferred qualities associated with the noun *friend*, and thereby the mind-sets among young people in the Baltic region when their ideas about friends and friendship are to be described in EFL. The occurrence of adjectives is thus relevant to analyse since they provide information about how the English language is used by 12-year-olds when they go into particulars about something which is close to them in their everyday life. Furthermore,

the selection of the 12-year-olds is pertinent to the study since they have different linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds.

The research questions are the following:

1. What adjectives in 12 year-olds' writing are used to describe a friend?
2. To what extent do 12-year-olds in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden share a common set of adjectives in EFL when they write about and describe their friend?
3. What differences can be identified regarding these adjectives across the five categories of 12-year-olds?

## 6. Material and Method

The BYLEC data is used for the purpose described above and the collection of the corpus in 2015 and 2016 was carried out thanks to cooperation with some 20 schools and six universities in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden. 491 young learners in five countries were engaged in producing six texts in English throughout the school year 2015/2016. The topics of the six texts in BYLEC are (1) *My best friend*, (2) *My pet*, (3) *A place I like*, (4) *An adventure/a journey of my dreams*, (5) *My favorite website/computer game/app*, and (6) *Me in the world in the future*. The instructions and the topics in the six different tasks were the same for all 12-year-olds. In addition, information about a series of background variables of the young learners was collected, such as gender and L1. Altogether the BYLEC data comprises 280,500 words. The procedures in the collection of the data are presented in detail by Sundh (2016).

Table 1. The number of texts with proportions in percentages used in the present study from the BYLEC-data.

| Country          | Text 1 | %    |
|------------------|--------|------|
| <b>Estonia</b>   | 83     | 21%  |
| <b>Latvia</b>    | 109    | 27%  |
| <b>Lithuania</b> | 105    | 26%  |
| <b>Russia</b>    | 50     | 12%  |
| <b>Sweden</b>    | 58     | 14%  |
| <b>Total</b>     | 405    | 100% |

In the present study, only the first texts produced were analysed. These first texts were found to be suitable for the analysis since the topic is limited in scope and it was clear that the young learners had interpreted it in a similar way. For the writing of Text 1 the



young learners were instructed to write as much as they could with the help of a series of questions (see Appendix 1). As can be seen in Table 1, there are 405 texts produced in total and the range of number of texts for each country is from 50 to 109.

The 405 texts written by five categories of young learners were thus analysed with an interest on a number of adjectives used in a specific context. All the texts were read and investigated by the researcher himself and all adjectives were collected that describe a friend. The adjectives which occur with three or more instances in the data in the context of describing a friend were taken into account. It is thus only the instances of adjectives when the friend is described that are counted and not the overall frequencies of occurrences of adjectives. This means that, for instance when a pet or a family member is described as being funny or lovely, these instances of *funny* or *lovely* are not included in the analysis. Adjectives in the comparative and superlative form were included in the investigation. The approach is thus qualitative with an interest on a specific feature in a specific linguistic context, i.e. adjectives used in descriptions of a particular noun. The method was to read the texts carefully to identify the types and tokens of adjectives as qualifiers to *friend*. Since *best* was provided in the instructions for Text 1, *best* is not included in the analysis. Finally only adjectives that turned up more than five times in a language category were considered for the presentation of the results.

## 7. Results and Analyses

### 7.1. The Distribution of the Types of Adjectives

Table 2 shows that in the 405 texts analysed, *funny* is the most common adjective with 137 instances followed by *tall* (98 instances), *good* (59 instances) and *friendly* (47 instances). *Nice* is only frequently used by the Swedish 12 year-olds and *smart* has this position for the Russian learners.

Table 2. The most frequent adjectives per country produced by the learners in Text 1 and in the context of them describing a friend. F=Frequencies with the number of instances.

| Estonia   |    | Latvia    |    | Lithuania |    | Russia   |    | Sweden |    |
|-----------|----|-----------|----|-----------|----|----------|----|--------|----|
| Type      | F  | Type      | F  | Type      | F  | Type     | F  | Type   | F  |
| funny     | 31 | funny     | 32 | funny     | 38 | tall     | 19 | funny  | 23 |
| friendly  | 17 | tall      | 30 | tall      | 35 | funny    | 13 | kind   | 23 |
| tall      | 14 | good      | 17 | good      | 23 | friendly | 12 | nice   | 16 |
| beautiful | 13 | beautiful | 16 | friendly  | 18 | smart    | 8  | happy  | 13 |
| kind      | 10 | slim      | 12 | slim      | 15 | good     | 7  | good   | 12 |
| lovely    | 10 |           |    |           |    |          |    |        |    |
| slim      | 10 |           |    |           |    |          |    |        |    |

*Funny* is the only type of adjective that occurs frequently in all the texts of all the five country categories and is the mostly used adjective in four of them and being the second most frequent one for the Russian learners. This means that *funny* stands out as the most commonly used one when 12-year-olds describe their best friend. *Good* and *tall* turn up frequently in texts of four out of the five country categories. The results show that young non-native speakers with different L1, school settings and cultural backgrounds all tend to think of using one common word, namely *funny* when they are asked to write about their best friend in EFL. Additionally, it is common for them to think of describing their friend as good or tall.

Table 2 also shows that when the adjectives identified are categorized according to their meanings, with a distinction between adjectives denoting inner characteristics or outer characteristics of a friend, there is a difference when the texts by the learners in the five countries are compared. All in all there are 11 types of adjectives used more than seven times. The first category comprises seven adjectives denoting inner characteristics of a friend: *friendly*, *funny*, *good*, *happy*, *kind*, *nice*, and *smart*. In the second category denoting outer characteristics of a friend and thus more physical appearance, three adjectives turn up: *beautiful*, *slim*, and *tall*. The adjective *lovely* can both refer to inner and outer characteristics and is therefore not included in one of these two categories.

The presentation above implies that the young learners have different perceptions of their best friend when they are asked to describe him or her. The young learner can either focus on inner characteristics of the friend, which is the case for the Swedish and Russian learners, or be more interested in the physical appearance and start with adjectives that describe it, which is the case for the Latvian and to a certain extent, Estonian learners. *Tall*, which is the second most common adjective used, is found to be frequent in all texts, except in the ones written by Swedish learners.

The results above in comparison with the occurrence of adjectives in Swedish textbooks of English for the age group (cf. Nordlund, 2016) show that three adjectives of the ones presented in Table 2 above are classified as frequent in the textbooks (with a frequency of at least 13 tokens in the textbook data). They are *good*, *happy*, and *nice*. These three adjectives are all on the top five list of adjectives used by the Swedish learners.

As stated above, the results clearly show that *funny* is the mostly preferred adjective across four of the five countries and for Russian learners, *funny* is in the second position. There can be several explanations to this preference by the young learners to describe their friend in this way. In what follows there are four interpretations and evidently they are highly tentative. Firstly, the similarity between *fun* and *funny* may lead the learners to using *funny*; they actively know the two words, confuse the two and their meanings, and

are then triggered to take one of them. Secondly, *funny* has two basic meanings, (1) amusing and (2) strange (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary) and these two meanings are simply adequate to combine for these 12-year-olds in order to describe what a best friend is like. Thirdly, there is no evidence that *funny* is a word that is frequent in school material and has therefore become the learners’ favourite but its frequency in the texts could be an indication of its occurrence in out-of-school English, such as computer games or media. Finally the structure “my friend is funny” could be a non-native collocation in English which is found in northern Europe irrespective of the learners’ L1 or cultural background and the two words *friend* and *funny* were learnt in primary school and the learners hold on tightly to these words that they feel safe with.

## 7.2. Collocations with ‘friend’

In order to identify whether the adjectives used by the 12-year-olds can be described as being collocations of *friend*, a survey of described collocational adjectives to *friend* according to the Oxford Collocational and Cambridge Collocational Dictionaries is provided in Appendix 2. Only adjectives as collocations to *friend* are listed in this presentation. One of the adjectives listed in Table 2 above is described as a being collocation of *friend*, namely *good*.

## 7.3. Pre-modifications of ‘funny’ by Intensifiers

In order to analyse the complexity of the adjective phrase with the use of *funny*, the occurrence of pre-modifications by intensifiers was investigated. The results in Table 3 show that a great majority of the instances of *funny* was not pre-modified; 106 instances (78%) were not pre-modified by an intensifier and 31 instances (22%) of *funny* were preceded by *very* or *so*. This preference for the common pre-modifier *very* is in line with claims of researchers that the overuse of general items is a characteristic of learner language (Levenston & Blum-Kulka, 1977) and that learners cling to the familiar, so called core words – words learnt early, widely usable and thereby safe (Hasselgren, 1994).

Table 3. Pre-modifications of ‘funny’ across the five groups of learners

| Estonia |    | Latvia |    | Lithuania |    | Russia |    | Sweden |    | Total     |
|---------|----|--------|----|-----------|----|--------|----|--------|----|-----------|
| Type    | F  | Type   | F  | Type      | F  | Type   | F  | Type   | F  |           |
| Ø       | 25 | Ø      | 27 | Ø         | 27 | Ø      | 12 | Ø      | 15 | 106 (78%) |
| very    | 6  | very   | 5  | very      | 11 | very   | 1  | very   | 7  | 31 (22%)  |
|         |    |        |    |           |    |        |    | so     | 1  |           |
| Total   | 31 |        | 32 |           | 38 |        | 13 |        | 23 | 137       |

In a comparison between the five categories of learners regarding the use of *very* together with *funny*, the Swedish young learners use it more proportionally than the other learner categories with a pre-modification on eight out of their total of 15 instances.

#### 7.4. Attributive and Predicative Functions in the Use of ‘funny’

There are two features that are considered to be characteristic of adjectives, besides taking the comparative and superlative forms and being pre-modified by an intensifier. These features are the occurrence in attributive and predicative functions. In the attributive function, adjectives pre-modify the head of a noun phrase, whereas in the predicative function adjectives function as subject or object complement (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985, p.417).

*Funny* used in the attributive function would occur in examples such as *a funny friend* whereas the predicative function would lead to structures such as *my friend is funny*.

Table 4. The distribution of ‘funny’ in the attributive and predicative functions across the five groups of learners

|                             | Estonia | Latvia | Lithuania | Russia | Sweden |
|-----------------------------|---------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|
| <b>Attributive function</b> | 2       | 4      | 2         | 0      | 0      |
| <b>Predicative function</b> | 29      | 28     | 36        | 13     | 23     |
| <b>Total</b>                | 31      | 32     | 38        | 13     | 23     |

As can be seen in Table 4, instances of *funny* in the attributive function are rare in the data; eight instances of *funny* (6%) of the total 137 precede the noun *friend*. The following example illustrates this use:

- (1) “She is very energetic, creative and funny friend.” (LV-D-24(B))

But it is thus obvious that the young learners across the five countries generally and more often use *funny* in the predicative function as in the following example:

- (2) “X is my best friend because he’s funny and friendly.” (EE-A-31)

Since there are so few instances when comparing the different learner categories,

no conclusions can be drawn on the attributive and predicative functions in relation to the country learner categories.

### 7.5. ‘Funny’ in Causal Relationships

It was obvious at the first steps in the analyses of *funny* that the learners describe their best friend as being funny in a causal relationship; the reason for them being their best friends was that they were funny. This could be identified with the help of the occurrence of *because*. The following two examples illustrate this phenomenon:

(3) “He is my best friend because he is very funny and friendly.” (EE-A-26)

(4) “She my best friend because she good and funny.” (RU-A-26)

This phenomenon also provides information about possible variation in the complexity of the learners’ production in the context of describing their friend as being funny.

Table 5. The distribution of the 30 instances of ‘because’ across the countries produced by the learners in Text 1 and used together with the adjective ‘funny’ in the context of describing a friend.

|  | Estonia | Latvia  | Lithuania | Russia  | Sweden  |
|--|---------|---------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Instances of <i>funny</i> together with <i>because</i> | 7 (22%) | 4 (13%) | 13 (34%)  | 2 (15%) | 4 (17%) |
| Total instances of <i>funny</i>                        | 31      | 32      | 38        | 13      | 23      |

Table 5 shows that when the learners in the data write about their best friend as being funny, the Lithuanian young learners more often and proportionally use *funny* in a causal context and thus have a more complex language structure than learners from the other categories. Since the data is limited and other means of expressing causal relationships were not investigated, further research is needed to confirm this tendency of variation across the five country categories.

### 7.6. Interpretations of the Findings

The 12-year-olds in the present study from different linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds have not reached far in their interlanguage development and can thus not be expected to produce idiomatic wordings and collocations when they write

about their friend. But the results show that they adhere to similar lexical patterns which can be results from their frequent exposure to common English words in media. These produced adjectives, such as *funny*, are parts of their productive word knowledge, and have become so after at first being part of their receptive word knowledge. The frequent exposure of an adjective such as *funny* in advertisements, social media, commercials, stickers, films and all other places where the English language is seen and heard makes these 12-year-olds use this word even in contexts when it is not idiomatic or collocational. This may particularly be the case in the regions of the present study where English is a foreign language and these out-of-school contexts of English are engaging and interesting for them and thereby add to their learning in the classroom.

The results further indicate that the 12-year-olds have a partial knowledge of the adjective *funny* since they master form and use but are not fully aware of its meaning in terms of referents and associations. An explanation may lie in them confusing *fun* and *funny* and leads to the pedagogical implication that words that are similar in form but different in meaning, either in the foreign language or in the context of the learner's first language, should be given special attention in teaching English as a foreign language. This interpretation is in line with the interference theory described above which then implies that the occurrence of *funny* in the texts is a consequence of activities in classrooms when *fun* and *funny* are learnt together. This way of treating words which are similar in form and in use together would render it difficult for the learners to grasp the different meanings of the two words. What is worth observing is that in spite of the cultural and educational differences in the five countries of the 12-year-olds' backgrounds, this phenomenon is noticeable.

The pedagogical implications of the results are that adjectives are to be learnt together with nouns in order to stimulate the learners' awareness of collocational and idiomatic patterns. In addition, the acquisition of vocabulary in a foreign language needs to be planned so that words that are similar in meaning, use and form are to be learnt separately. Finally, the impact of the out-of-school context cannot be neglected and is a significant factor for the acquisition of English vocabulary in EFL.

## 8. Conclusion

The results show that 12-year-olds in five different countries in the Baltic Region use a number of similar adjectives when they are asked to write about their best friend. In spite of their different L1 and cultural backgrounds it is clear that they have the same preferences for a set of adjectives, and especially for *funny*, when they describe a friend. No explanations can be found in equivalent words in their L1 or in the frequent occurrence of this word in the vocabulary used in textbooks in EFL. *Funny* was pre-modified by the intensifier *very* in some 20% of the instances. The learners used *funny* in the predicative



function in a great majority of the instances.

The question is whether we can distinguish a lexical feature which is characteristic of non-native speakers of English, in this case Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Swedish 12-year-olds, and who will use English as the contact language in communication in the future. In descriptions of English as a lingua franca (ELF), the focus is primarily on variation in pronunciation and accuracy, for instance regarding countable and uncountable nouns (Jenkins, 2007). The results in the present study imply that certain patterns in the choice of vocabulary in ELF among young learners in the Baltic Region can be distinguished. The young learners of different nationalities and who have different L1 share the same idea of what word to use in the English language when they are to describe their friend. This phenomenon would fall into the framework of varieties of World Englishes and local regional norms and additionally the concept of lexical teddy bears, i.e. the preference for certain lexical combinations as described by Hasselgren (1994). These Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian and Swedish young learners understand each other in communication in English even though the lexical choices they make are not in line with described collocations by native speakers. The young learners of different language and cultural backgrounds on the one hand seem to have their own preferences in their choice of focusing on inner or outer characteristics of a friend but on the other hand share similar ideas and have their preferred lexical teddy bears and then particularly *funny* when it comes to describing friendships.

The results provide useful indications of similarities and differences in choices of vocabulary in EFL by young learners from different backgrounds. Studies of learner language have so far mainly focused on comparing learners’ structures, collocations and pronunciation patterns in EFL with production by native speakers. Further investigations on both structures and lexis in production by learners of EFL can reveal new patterns and usages of English when used by non-native speakers.

## **Acknowledgements**

This study would not have been possible without the participation of colleagues at Tartu University, Estonia;  
Daugavpils University, Latvia;  
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania;  
Immanuel Kant Federal University of Russia in Kaliningrad, Russia and  
Stockholm University, Sweden.

Teachers and pupils contributed with the compilation of the data at the following

schools:

Norrbackaskolan, Visby, Sweden

St Hansskolan, Visby, Sweden

Kräklingbo skola, Katthammarsvik, Sweden

Tartu Karlova School, Tartu, Estonia

Tartu Tamme School, Tartu, Estonia

Narva Pähklikmäe Gymnasium, Narva, Estonia

Narva Keeltelütseum, Narva, Estonia

Daugavpils Saskaņas pamatskola, Daugavpils, Latvia

Daugavpils Basic school Nr 11, Daugavpils, Latvia

Daugavpils Vienības Pamatskola, Daugavpils, Latvia

Daugavpils Krievu vidusskola- licejs, Daugavpils, Latvia

Rīgas Sergeja Zolotoka Vidusskola, Riga, Latvia

Kaunas Senamiestis Middle School, Kaunas, Lithuania

Kaunas Jonas and Petras Vileisiai Middle School, Kaunas, Lithuania

Kaliningrad school number 1, Kaliningrad, Russia

Kaliningrad school number 8, Kaliningrad, Russia

Kaliningrad school number 21, Kaliningrad, Russia

Russian Orthodox Gymnasium, Kaliningrad, Russia

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## Appendix 1

Text 1: My best friend

*Your friend's name and age?*

*Where does your friend live?*

*Your friend's family? Pets in their home?*

*Describe your friend.*

*How often do you meet?*

*What do you do with your friend when you are together?*

*Why is he/she your best friend?*

*Tell us more about your best friend*





## Appendix 2

### Collocations of *friend*

| <b>Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English<sup>1</sup></b> | <b>Cambridge - Free Online Collocations Dictionary</b> |
|---|--|
| best  | close  |
| bosom   | dear   |
| close   | faithful   |
| dear  | former   |
| good  | good   |
| great   | great  |
| intimate  | intimate   |
| real  | late   |
| special   | long   |
|   | mutual   |
|   | new  |
|   | next   |
|   | old  |
|   | particular   |
|   | personal   |
|   | poor   |
|   | relative   |
|   | right  |
|   | true   |
|   | young  |
|   | warm   |
|   | well   |

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ozdic.com/> has the same results (retrieved on Oct 31, 2016)