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BACKGROUND

In many EFL curricula, speaking abilities or communicative language skills constitute one if not the superordinate goals.

BUT:

There is limited understanding

- how **features of speaking ability** (e.g., vocabulary and fluency) develop in young language learners (YLLs) and
- whether a **picture narration task**, a prominent task type in the YLL classroom, can be used to elicit features of speaking ability at various levels.

Let's explore this issue...



RESEARCH QUESTION

How do oral performance features differ in a picture narration task across proficiency and grade levels?

METHODOLOGY

Participating students

Secondary school	Grade level	The			ALL
		Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	
	Grade 8	34	28	20	82
	Grade 7	91	31	12	134
Primary school	Grade 6	14	48	14	76
	Grade 5	15	24	13	52
	Grade 4	20	23	10	53
	TOTAL	174	154	69	397

Data collection

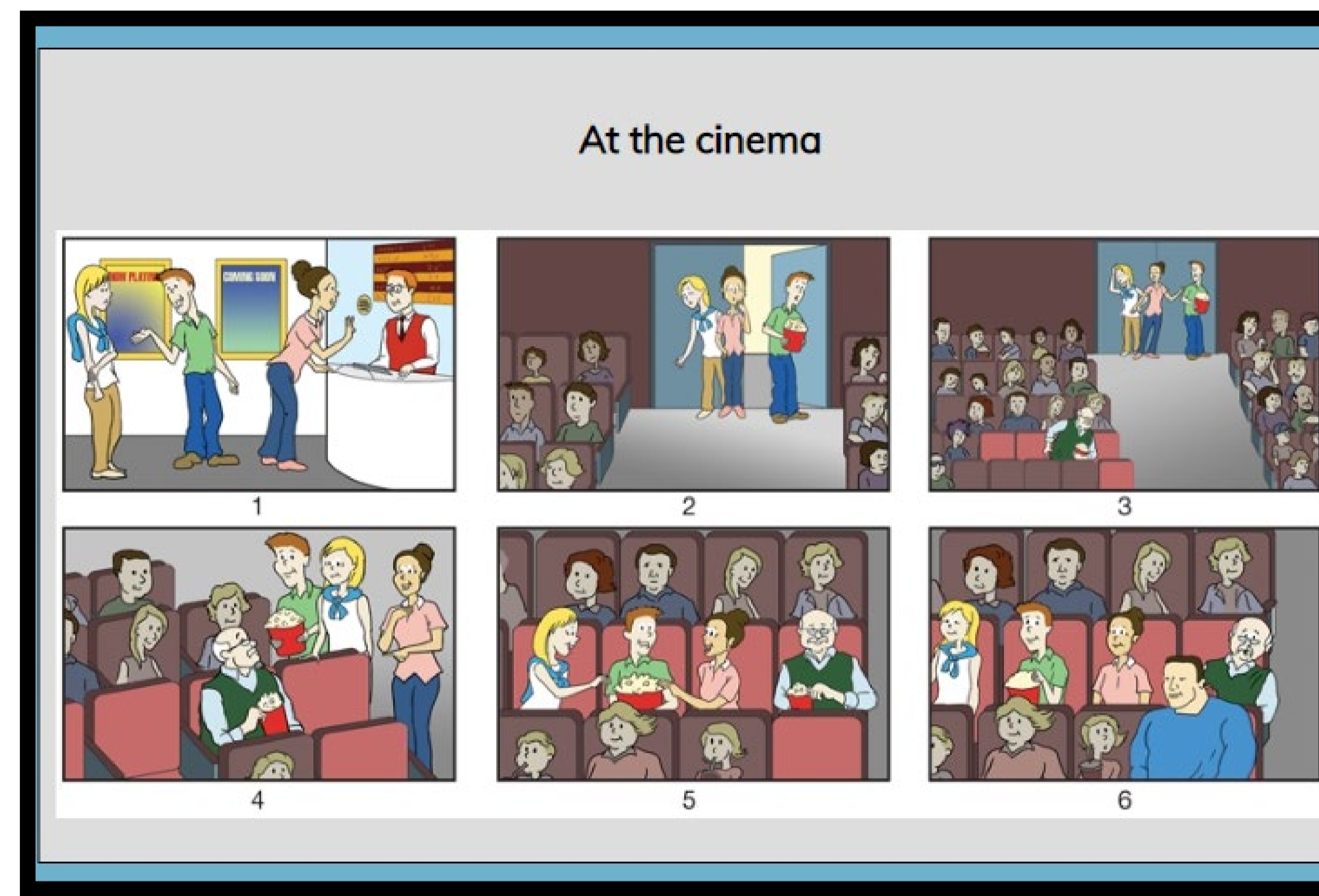


The picture narration task was one of three speaking tasks administered on a computer by classrooms teachers in Spring 2022.

Preparation time = 1 min

Speaking time = 1 min

The picture narration task

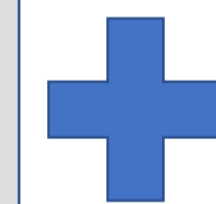


DATA ANALYSIS

Scored by TOEFL Junior® raters
(Speaking scores: 0-4)



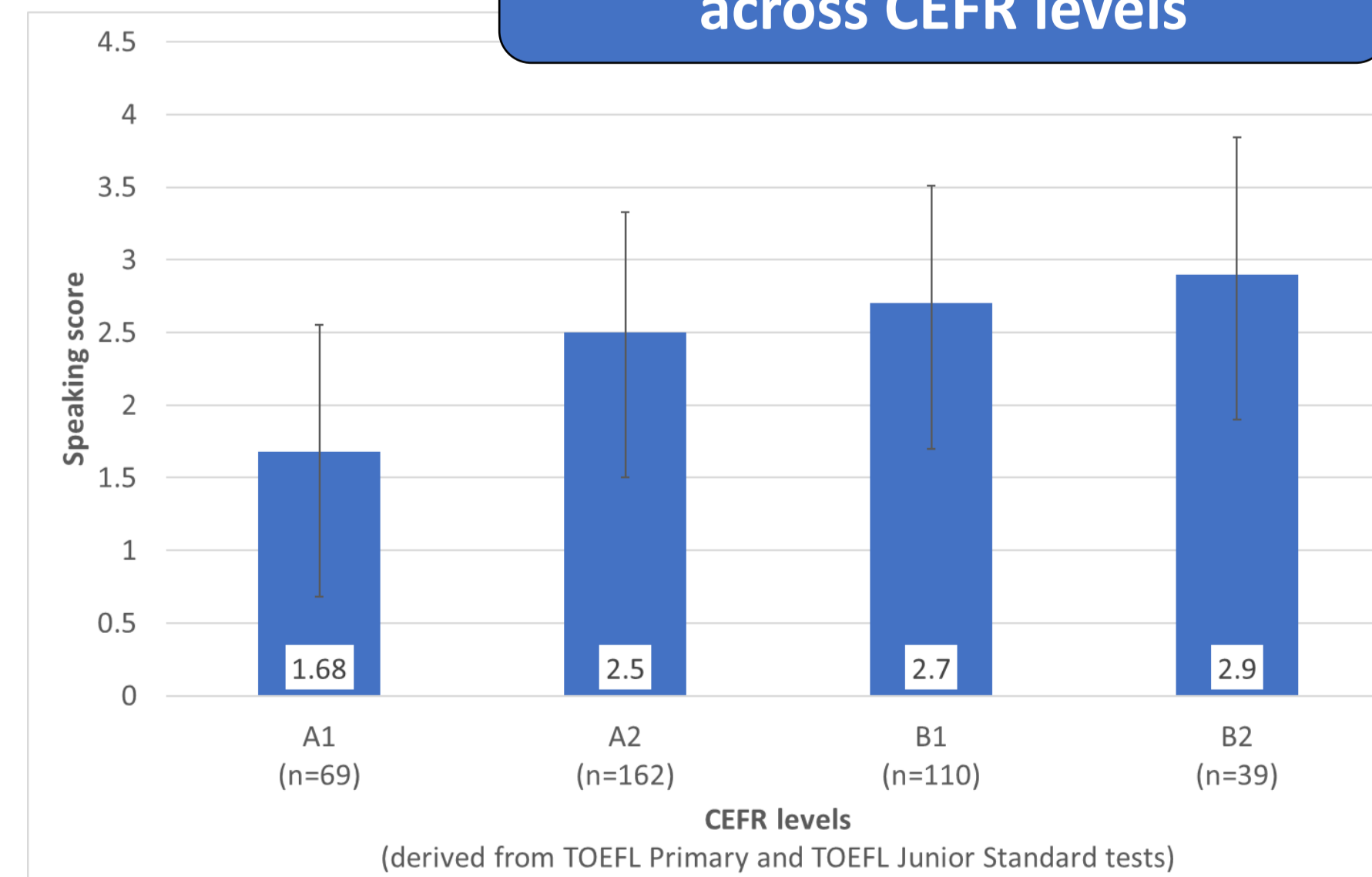
Fluency
(words per second & mean long silences)
SpeechRaterSM



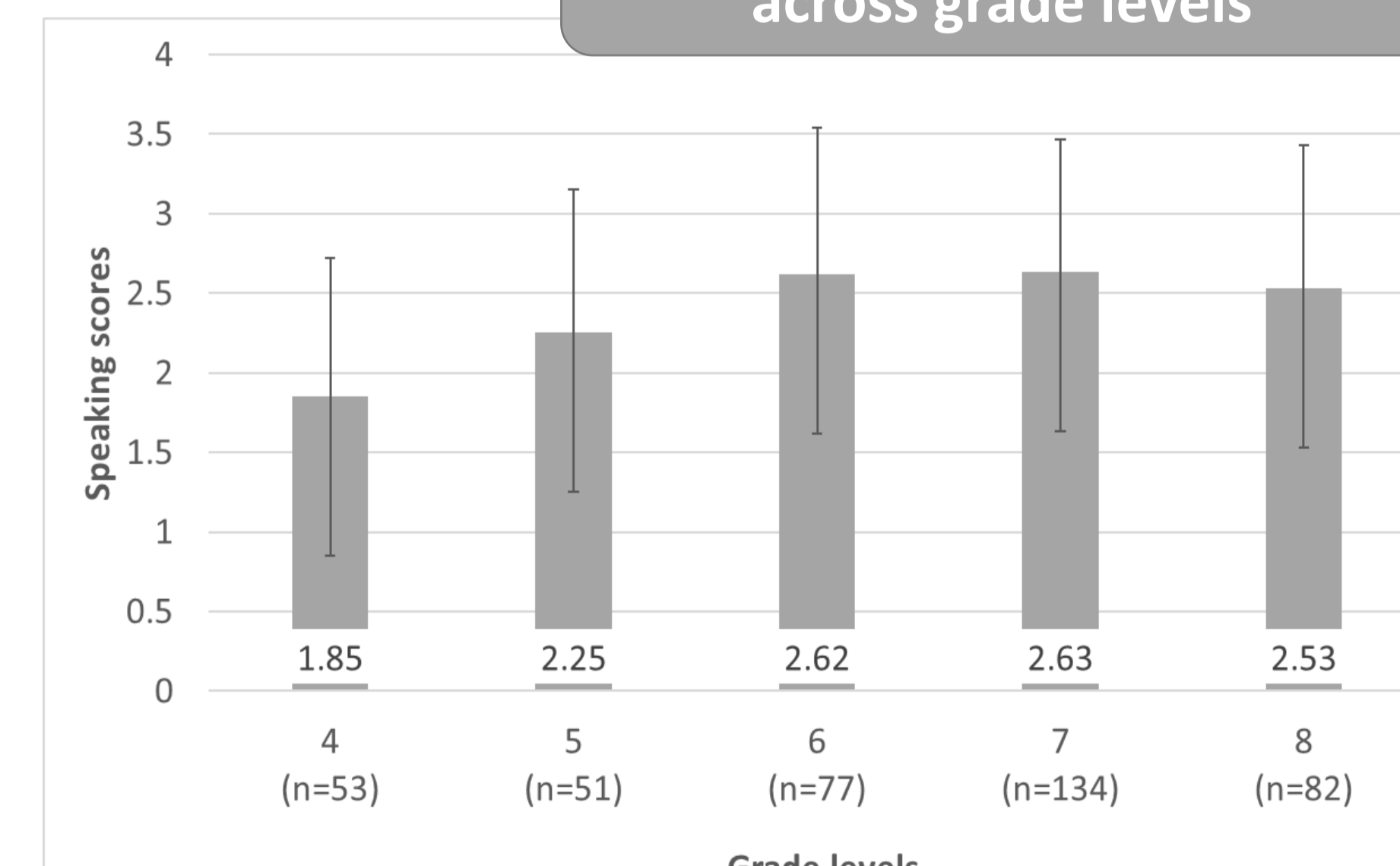
Vocabulary
(tokens & unique word types)
TextEvaluatorTM

RESULTS

Average speaking scores across CEFR levels



Average speaking scores across grade levels



CEFR level	Words per second	Mean of long silences	Tokens	Types
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
B2 (n=39)	3.17 (.67)	1.16 (.45)	87.72 (31.85)	52.23 (16.93)
B1 (n=110)	2.98 (.46)	1.38 (.49)	77.25 (26.21)	44.57 (11.67)
A2 (n=162)	2.85 (.46)	1.30 (.47)	73.02 (27.05)	41.17 (12.92)
A1 (n=69)	2.45 (.54)	1.67 (.71)	40.93 (25.58)	23.32 (13.05)



With increasing proficiency, YLLs' performances showed higher speech fluency and a wider range of vocabulary.

Grade level	Words per second	Mean of long silences	Tokens	Unique word types
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
8 (n=82)	3 (.44)	1.30 (.43)	77.12 (27.59)	44.58 (14.07)
7 (n=134)	2.91 (.61)	1.36 (.50)	75.86 (29.08)	43.44 (14.64)
6 (n=76)	2.96 (.36)	1.22 (.36)	74.79 (30.01)	42.25 (14.76)
5 (n=52)	2.77 (.52)	1.32 (.68)	64.96 (31.56)	37.12 (15.08)
4 (n=53)	2.25 (.48)	1.70 (.73)	50.55 (32.31)	27.72 (16.24)



With increasing grade levels, there is a general increase across features, but a slight "backwards trend" (fluency) or "slow down" (vocabulary) between 6th to 7th grade.

Feature	Definition	Derived from	Correlation
Fluency	Words per second	SpeechRater®	.28**
	Mean of long silences	SpeechRater®	-.36**
Vocabulary	Tokens (Number of words used)	Textevaluator	.58**
	Unique word types	Textevaluator	.64**



Correlations between task scores and performance features are all statistically significant.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

- The picture narration task ...
 - allowed YLLs to produce oral L2 output at various levels of proficiency and
 - can be used to obtain insights into YLLs' speaking performances and distinguish between YLLs' proficiency levels in terms of fluency and lexical diversity.
- CEFR levels as a proxy for proficiency seem to provide a clearer understanding of EFL speaking skills than grade levels as the latter showed considerable variability of YLLs' speaking proficiency.