Writing Development of A Bilingual Child: Japanese and English

Eiko Kato-Otani
Osaka Jogakuin College

Abstract
Writing development is an important aspect of children’s school lives. This case study examines the writing development of a third-grade Japanese bilingual child who lives in the United States by focusing on what development can be found in her writing both in Japanese and English (e.g. length, spelling, topic development, use of descriptive language, and characteristics of a bilingual child’s writing). The participant’s writing data included her journals, stories, and reports that she wrote as part of her school work. For the purpose of comparing her writings in Japanese and English, her journal writing of the past three years was used for analysis. The data were analyzed based on the number of words, spelling, and the development of the use of kanji characters. In addition, the writing development of both languages was analyzed by using the composition component of the Two-Way Immersion Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric. The analysis shows that the participant has been acquiring writing skills in both Japanese and English simultaneously. This study depicts an example of successful development of bilingualism and biliteracy. It also finds that code-switching can sometimes effectively support the learning of writing skills.

1 Introduction

Compared to the studies of bilingual children’s writing (e.g. Chinese/English, Spanish/English), not much research has been conducted on how bilingual Japanese/English children develop their writing skills in two languages. Due to the global economy and more job opportunities in foreign countries, there are many Japanese children who acquire their second language while maintaining Japanese. The Japanese writing system is quite different from an alphabetic language like English. It is important to examine how children who face different writing systems develop their writing skills in two languages.

1.1 Biliteracy development

Bilingual students’ writing has been examined in various ways. Bilinguals use transfer skills between two languages. According to the Linguistic Interdependence Principle examined in the Cummins’ study (1991), a bilingual’s academic development such as language, literacy and concept transformation is interdependent. This means that bilinguals who gained knowledge in one language use it when learning in another language. In a study of how ESL students transfer their writing skills between languages (Icelandic and English) (Berman, 1994), it was found that students who transfer their writing skills between the languages were
assisted by their grammatical proficiency in the target language. A study which examined emergent English writing of kindergarteners found similar development between English L1 and English L2 children. It suggests that the relationship between oral and written language is transactional, giving benefit to English L2 children. Kenner (2004) points out that bilingual children have more than one language to use for writing and for communication. In her study, she found that bilingual children (Chinese-English, Arabic-English, Spanish-English) understood the differences between their two writing systems, but they also looked for ways to connect them to transform meaning across the languages.

The role of teachers, families, and communities has been reported in the writing development of bilinguals. In examining how young children learn how to write in English in a Spanish-English dual language kindergarten program, the importance of trained bilingual teachers and committed administrators was emphasized (Riojas Clark, 1995). Similar developmental patterns were found in Spanish-English bilingual children’s writing samples compared to monolingual Spanish children’s writing. However, bilingual children may use both English and Spanish in one sentence or paragraph to send their message (Rubin & Carian, 2005). This study also suggests that teachers should give bilingual students many opportunities to write in two languages for the teachers to understand their students’ writing development. In the family stories projects, Dworin (2006) suggests that bilingual children should use two languages for communicating, reading and writing in school. Teachers should use topics from children’s homes and communities, making children aware of the outside school world. Also, written translation can foster bilingual children’s metalinguistic awareness. In the English-Spanish two-way immersion program, in which equal regard is given to English and Spanish, family atmosphere, student-centered instruction, and strong parent-community partnership helped limited-English students score high in English reading and writing (Senesac, 2002). Kenner et.al (2004) found that young emergent biliterates interpreted different writing systems (Chinese-English, Arabic-English, Spanish-English). In spite the limited input in Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish compared to the time committed to learning English, the children understood key concepts of Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish writing systems. They showed their own interpretations supported by their family and teachers.

1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to explore how a bilingual child develops writing skills both in Japanese and English. The following questions guided the study:
1. What development can be found in my participant’s writing in both languages?
2. Are there any differences between her Japanese writing and English writing?
3. Are there any characteristics of a bilingual child’s writing?

2 Method

2.1 Participant

The participant in this case study is a third-grade Japanese bilingual child who is growing up in the US. Hikari has attended a Japanese Saturday school since she was in the first grade. As the Japanese school starts in April, she began to receive formal literacy instruction at Japanese school five months prior to receiving literacy instruction at her American school. She has been in the mainstream classroom since she was in the first grade. She returns to Japan and does visiting enrolment in a public school in Japan every summer.
2.2 Data sources

The participant’s data included her journal, stories, and reports that she wrote as part of her school work. For the purpose of comparing her writings in Japanese and English, I focused on her journal writing of the past three years because she spent an equal amount of time on her journals in Japanese and English.

Table 1. The number of journals analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First grade</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second grade</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third grade</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

2.3 Procedure and Analyses

First, I counted the number of words used in her journals, and compared the number used in her Japanese and English journals. Then, I analyzed information about her orthographic theories (phonetic transcription, overgeneralization, and mastery of conventional spelling) for her English writing. I also analyzed the development of the use of kanji characters in her Japanese journals. Then, I compared the writing development of both languages by using the composition component of the Two-Way Immersion Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric developed by Howard (2003). It includes topic development, sentence formation, use of supporting details to elaborate a topic, and use of descriptive language. Finally, I examined the characteristics of a bilingual child’s writing.

3 Results

3.1 The number of words used

The number of words used in Hikari’s journal increased on average in Japanese and in English as shown in Figure 1. Although the number of words used increased drastically from the first grade to the 2nd grade journal, it decreased in the third grade journal in English. This is because she has had other assignments to work on and did not spend much time on her journals. In contrast, the number of words used in her Japanese journal has continued to increase since the first grade.

Figure 1. The number of words

Although the number of words used on average in her Japanese journal increased, it did not steadily increase as shown in Figure 2. The number of words used changed over the three years, and it shows that whenever she had a good topic to write about, she wrote a lot.
The same trend can be seen in her English journal as shown in Figure 3. The number of words used in the beginning of a school year is fewer than that of the rest of the year, but it did not steadily increase throughout the school year. She spent every summer in Japan to attend a Japanese school for a full month, but it did not influence her negatively much in her English writing. She kept a good English journal while she was in Japan.

![Figure 2. The number of words in Japanese](image1)

![Figure 3. The number of words in Japanese](image2)

### 3.2 Spelling errors

In examining Hikari’s first-grade journal, there is only one spelling error: mathmatic. She used conventional spelling for both regular and irregular words (see Table 2). As she began to use more words in her second- and third-grade journals, there were several spelling errors which can be categorized in phonetic transcription and overgeneralization. Compared to the conventional spelling she used, these spelling errors, however, are minor ones. She mastered most of the conventional spelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Spelling errors in English</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phonetic transcription</strong></td>
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<td>phonetic transcription</td>
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<td>Overgeneralization</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 Mastery of kanji

The mastery of kanji characters is as important as that of English spelling. The number of *kanji* characters used in her journals increased from first- and to third-grade. Figure 4 shows the change of the number of *kanji* characters in her journal.
3.4 Writing development (topic, sentence formation, supporting details, use of descriptive language)

To examine the development of Hikari’s writing, the Two-way Immersion Narrative Written Assessment Rubric developed by Howard (2003) was used. Three journals written in the beginning, middle, and end of the school year in each grade were chosen for analysis. In examining these pieces of journal writing, she has shown development in each area examined in both Japanese and English\(^1\) (see Figure 5 and 6). Figure 3 below shows the assessment of Hikari’s writing in Japanese. The assessment shows that some improvement can be observed from first- to second-grade writing. The same trend can be seen in her English journal writing shown in Figure 6. Her writing in the end of the school year in second and third grade were assessed more negatively because they became shorter and the contents were not developed well. One of the limitations of this study is that journal writing is not a formal writing, and her writing could have been assessed based on the same topics assigned in both Japanese and English.

Figure 5. Writing assessment in Japanese

Figure 6. Writing assessment in English

Figure 7 and 8 show the comparison of English writing in second and third grade. Her Japanese writing is assessed more positively in both grades. Figure 8 shows the assessment of writing in the third grade. Her writing does not improve much from the second-grade writing and became worse in the end because the contents of the last piece of her Japanese and English were not developed well.

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\(^1\) For the English data, first grade writing data were excluded from the analysis because only writing in the end was available.
3.5 Are there any differences between her Japanese writing and English writing?

To answer this question, I picked a topic Hikari wrote about both in Japanese and English, “Gabriel’s birthday party.” I translated her Japanese into English and compared whether there was a difference between the two pieces. There is no major difference. She omitted subjects in Japanese, which is grammatically correct in Japanese. She did not specify the name of the game she played last in her English piece, but she used the word “imitation game” in Japanese. She probably did not know how to say imitation in English. Although I did not find any major differences in these pieces, she precisely described what happened in her Japanese writing with references and reasons. This seems redundant in Japanese, and I speculate that she has learned to describe events or things in detail in English and has transferred this into Japanese.

3.6 Are there any characteristics of a bilingual child’s writing?

Code-switching was found in Hikari’s writing. She used several English words using katakana, which is used for foreign words in Japanese, such as birthday party and sleep over. Interestingly, she used Japanese characters in English when she did not know the word such as used bookstore. After she used kanji characters in her English journal, she wrote asking whether her teacher knew this Japanese word.

An example of code-switching

Today I just spent my time in the こたつ２[kotasu]. (I didn’t know how to say the word.) Then, me and my one of my cousin went to 古本屋３[furuhonya]. (Do you understand this word?) There, we could buy old books and that good, because you don’t had to pay that much. I love古本屋[furuhonya].

4 Discussion

This case study shows that it is possible to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously. This section discusses how schooling in both languages has helped the participant to be biliterate. It also discusses the code-switching for communication as a characteristic of a bilingual child writing.

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2 small table with an electric heater underneath and covered by a quilt
3 used bookstore
4.1 Schooling in both languages

Relationships between positive home environments and children’s literacy development have been emphasized by many scholars. Even though Hikari is growing up in the US and has been in the mainstream classroom since the first grade, English is her second language. She has been exposed to English literacy more than Japanese. She learns to read and write in English five days a week. Hikari’s parents send her to a Japanese Saturday school, which has helped her to maintain Japanese in the US. Many Japanese children living in the US go to a Saturday Japanese school. Most of the children are not immigrants to the US, and they are expected to return to Japan after spending a couple of years in the US. Many parents send their children to this weekend school to have them maintain their Japanese as well as keep up with the contents of subjects taught in Japan. The ministry of Education sends free textbooks used in schools in Japan to children living overseas. Hikari is one of such Japanese students who goes to a Japanese Saturday school. Even though this schooling is only once a week, it helps Japanese children to use their first language in school. To foster biliteracy, Sanborn (2005) suggests that children should be educated in their first language by teachers, not by parents, even if it is only once a week. There are several benefits to this kind of school. One of them is that student are given homework, an important part of the learning process. Hikairi was given homework from her Japanese Saturday school, which includes a number of kanji practices and writing in Japanese.

Hikari’s parents also gave her a chance to experience a Japanese school life using a visiting enrolment program in Japan during the US summer vacation time. This gives her an opportunity to be fully exposed to the language monolingual Japanese children use in school. Another advantage she had during her summer in Japan is her American school teacher’s encouragement. One of the agreements between her teacher and her parents when she goes to Japan is to keep a journal in English so as not to forget English. Hikari kept this promise and her mother checked if she was writing in English. Schooling in both languages has helped her to write in Japanese and English successfully.

4.2 Code-switching for communication

Whenever Hikari did not know an English word when she wrote in English, she put in Japanese words. Instead of considering this as a deficit in writing, some researchers consider this as benefit of bilingual children because the purpose of writing is for communication (Rubin & Carian, 2005; Kenner, 2004). Hikari used such strategy to communicate with her teacher, who does not know Japanese. As seen in her code-switching example, she asked her teacher if she knew the Japanese word to consider the reader of her journal. Another interesting point of her code-switching, she finished her journal with a Japanese word. She used a Japanese writing period, , instead of an English writing period. This shows that she understands the different writing systems clearly. In a study which examined code-switching of bilingual children’s writing, Gort (2006) found that developing bilingual children used code-switching to express themselves for things they care about. In examining Hikari’s code switches, she used things she liked in Japan such as kotatsu and furuhonya. Kotatsu is a small table with an electric heater underneath and covered by a quilt. When she visited Japan for the New Year’s holidays, she liked sitting in the kotatsu. She also liked furuhonya, used bookstores, where she could buy Japanese manga [comics]. In this context, she wanted to tell her American teacher the things she enjoyed in Japan. It is important to note that there is no equivalent word for kotatsu in
English. Therefore, the only thing she could do was to send her message out using the Japanese word.

5 Conclusion

Although this study is limited in the number of participants, it makes a case for the importance of schooling in both languages. It shows that it is possible to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously and successfully. It also finds that code-switching can sometimes effectively support the learning of writing skills. Further research should examine the writing assessment in a more appropriate way. In free journal writing, the methodology I used could not assess her writing in both languages well. For example, the same writing topics should be given in both languages in the beginning, middle, and the end of a school year. So, we could better understand her writing development.

Acknowledgements

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References