

A Bilingual Child's Two Writing System

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Abstract. The present study focusses on the writing evolution of a fourth-grade Japanese bilingual child who lives in Malaysia through the use of Howards' (2003) Two-Way Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric. This study examined the changes occurred in a bilingual child's journals written in Japanese and English, and to explore if there has been any interaction between his writing skills of the two languages. The data collection involved document analysis of his written journals. The document analysis of the written journals was based on word count, logography errors, and writing evolution (e.g., subject matter, sentence formation, and usage of adjectives). The findings of this study indicated that the participants' writing is grammatically correct in English, and both Japanese and English journals have a clear subject matter. However, further analysis on sentence formation and adjectives revealed that the participant has written poorly in his Japanese journals compared to his English journals. Thus, these findings point to the significance that schooling in two languages and early exposure of target language could have effectively supported the participant learning of writing skills. Through contrastive analysis, this study reflects on the successful evolution of bilingualism where it is possible for a bilingual child to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously.

Keywords: Japanese bilingual; bilingual; writing evolution; writing systems.

Introduction

Writing competence is one the most important skills for bilingual individuals, and it is necessary for them to acquire especially in this global economy where English writing fluency is one of the major determinant for attractive job opportunities in foreign countries, and in most international trade centre and corporation. For this reason, bilingual's writing has been researched substantially (Rubin & Carlan, 2005). Likewise, Coulmas (1989) and other researcher (Thompson, 1987; Okada, 1991) have pointed out the need for critical discussion on bilingual children's writing. As Coulmas (1989) and Okada (1991)

explained, writing systems can be classified generally into morphemes (e.g., Chinese and English) or syllables (e.g., Japanese). There may be numerous studies on bilingualism but studies on how bilingual children writing skills evolved in two languages with different writing system remains underexplored and not well-addressed. Thus, studies on how bilingual child's writing skills evolve in the two languages with different writing systems are necessary and this study seeks to respond to this need.

Though it is important for bilingual children to do well in the writing tasks, it is also equally important for bilingual children to foster awareness and acquire the phonetic transcription. Kaneko & Iverson (2009) and other researchers (Cummins, 2000; Kaneko, 2006; Wells, 1996) have noted that a vast degree of phonetic transcription awareness is required to write well in languages with different writing systems. In this case, the Japanese writing system differs from the English writing system. English writing system uses the alphabetic principle in which letters represent sound that make reliance on logography without errors. On the other hand, Japanese writing system used two different characters; logographic and morphographic Kanji that evolve from Chinese and Kanji characters (Sampson, 1985; Wydel et al., 1993). In addition, Japanese language has fewer vowels compared to English language. Thus, due to these unique features of the writing system, Japanese tends to transcribe into near-equivalent versions based on the pronunciation. In light of this, it is vital to investigate how bilingual children who experience two different writing systems cultivate their writing competence in both languages.

A thorough review of literature reveals that the studies that examine bilingual writing often have their focus on writing behaviours (Escamilla, 2006; Koch, 2014), teachers' belief system with regard to bilingualism (Flores, 2001), codeswitching of bilingual writing (Gort, 2006), translanguaging (Velasco & Garcia, 2014), and associate writing development with memory and language learning disabilities (e.g., Spanish-English, French-English) (Adams & Guillot, 2008; Danzak & Silliman, 2014). Little attention, however, is given to the critical analysis of changes that occurred in a bilingual child's journals written in Japanese and English, and interaction between the writing skills of the two languages. Limited knowledge is shared in the realm of interaction between bilingual child's writing skills of two languages. Thus, the study on the changes and interaction of the bilingual child is a neglected domain that needs to be explored further.

Following Cummins (2000) findings, the writing competence of a bilingual child is interdependent. The notion of interdependent here was developed when the bilingual child applies the knowledge gained in one language into another. Reflecting this prominence of bilinguals who use transfer skills between two languages, Bernam (1994) conducted a study among ESL students, using transfer skills in their writing. He found that these transfer skills were aided by their grammatical proficiency in the target language. More importantly, similar development was found between students' L1 and L2 in English whereby these students oral and written language is transactional and beneficial L2 students (Zhang, 2013).

Bilingualism

This section introduces the distinction of bilingualism. According to Myers-Scotton (2006), bilingualism refer to ‘a person speaking at least two languages’. Viljamaa (2012) shed further light on the above perspectives suggesting that it is not really vital for an individual to have fluency in the two languages. More importantly is when he is a fluent speaker in one language and able to comprehend another language. That is, according to him, bilingualism occurs when an individual has high oral proficiency in both languages. In addition, Gleason and Ratner (2017) also pointed out that there are two types of bilingualism namely native bilingual and second language acquisition. For example, native bilingual is when an individual learned two languages simultaneously since birth, while in second language acquisition, it is seen as a process with optimal age for learning. For this reason, Gleason and Ratner (2017) noted that there was clear difference between native bilingualism and second language acquisition bilingualism.

Writing system

The notion of writing system was believed to have a clear link with general ideas of writing and to other specific languages (Cook & Bassetti, 2005). According to Coulmas (2003), who viewed writing system as a set of script and orthography has regarded writing system as systematic and specific. Script in the sense as defined by Coulmas involves letters or characters while orthography involves symbol-sound, capitalization, hyphenation, and punctuation. Coulmas (2003) also noted that the notion of writing system overlaps with orthography by means of referring to the set of rules used in a particular language for spelling and punctuation, and in fact, he termed it as ‘the English writing system’.

Aims of study

This study aims to explore the changes that occurred in a bilingual child’s journals written in Japanese and English, and to investigate if there has been any interaction between his writing skills of the two languages. To achieve these aims, the following research questions guide the study: What are the changes in a bilingual child’s journals written in Japanese and English? Is there any interaction between his writing skills in the two languages?

Methodology

This section describes the methodology of the study including research design, research participant, and data collection and analysis procedure.

Research design

The research design of this study was a single case study approach within the qualitative research paradigm. As suggested by Yin (2011), application of case study provides a rich description and analysis of a phenomena. Thus, it is specifically relevant and suitable for this design to be adopted to the current study where the researcher intents to study the participant in his setting, which is to explore a fourth-grade Japanese bilingual child’s writing evolution with two different writing systems.

Research participant

This study included a fourth-grade Japanese bilingual child lived in Malaysia, where his predominant schooling language is English. He has attended a Japanese school since born till first grade, and then moved to Malaysia with his parents - a highly literate English father and Japanese mother. He is currently studying in an international school in Malaysia whereby he began to receive formal literacy instruction since second grade till now, grade four.

Data collection procedure

The participants' data included his journals and stories which were written in both languages - English and Japanese. To analyse and examine in contrast, the researcher focal point was on topic that the participant wrote about in both Japanese and English; My favourite season of the year. The researcher then translated his Japanese writing into English with the help from the participants' mother and distinguished whether there were any differences between the two pieces as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The number of journals analysed for word count

Grade level	English	Japanese
First grade	3	5
Second grade	5	6
Third grade	8	5
Fourth grade	10	5

Data analysis procedure

The present study involved three stages of procedure. In stage one, the researcher counted and compared the number of words used by the participant in both Japanese and English journals. In stage two, the information about his orthographic theories (e.g., phonetic transcription, conventional spelling) for his English writing was analysed. In stage three, Howard's (2003) Two-Way Immersion Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric was used to compare the participant's writing evolution of both languages - Japanese and English based on the number of word count, logography errors, and writing evolution (e.g., subject matter, sentence formation, and usage of adjectives).

Findings

The findings of this study will be discussed in three categories namely (i) word count/used, (ii) logography errors, and (iii) writing evolution (e.g., subject matter, sentence formation, and usage of adjectives).

(i) Word count/used

The number of words used increased especially in his journal written in English compared to Japanese over the four years (see Table 2). It is noteworthy to mention here that the number of words used in English journal increased greatly from second grade till fourth grade while the number of words used in Japanese journal decreased in the second grade till fourth grade. This finding is significant because even though the participant attended a Japanese school on every Saturday in Malaysia and attended a Japanese school in Japan during his first

grade, the number of hours he spent in Malaysia international school outnumbered those spent in Japanese school. As a result, this could have accelerated the participants' flexibility to use more words in English compared to Japanese.

Table 2: The number of words used in both journals

Grade level	English	Japanese
First grade	30	37
Second grade	36	24
Third grade	48	19
Fourth grade	65	15

Based on Table 2, the number of words used in Japanese was at its highest in first grade and decreases since then till fourth grade. It is not surprising that the participant used less Japanese words since second grade as the time he spent learning English language in Malaysia's international school is more than Japanese language. Likewise, living in the majority language community whose main language is English might have contributed to his improvement in English writing.

It is important to reiterate that although the number of words used in English increased over the four years, it did not increase steadily as shown in Table 2. The number of words used altered from first grade till fourth grade, and this could indicate that whenever he encountered an interesting subject matter or something relevant to his experience to write about, his writing enhanced in great length. Hence, it seems to be the case that even though the participant spent every Saturday attending a Japanese school since second grade in Malaysia, it did not influence him negatively in his English writing.

(ii) Logography errors

In examining the participant's journals, there was only one logography error; ward in his first grade and two conventional spelling errors; kom and en in second grade. The participant practiced conventional spelling sequence for both regular and irregular words (see Table 3). The findings, while showing a reduce trend of logography errors from second grade till fourth grade (see Table 3) might imply that as the participant practiced and used more conventional spelling over the years, this might have aided him in mastering most of the conventional spelling.

Table 3: The number of logography errors

Type/Grade level	First grade	Second grade	Third grade	Fourth grade
Phonetic transcription	ward (word)	bue (blue)	nurvos (nervous)	nevos (nervous)
		to (too)	treager (treasure)	tought (thought)
		lise(rise)	explaine (explain)	stumch (stomach)
		butiful (beautiful)	prtend (pretend)	

		gise (guys)		
Conventional spelling		kom (come)		
		en (in)		

(ii) Writing evolution (e.g., subject matter, sentence formation, and usage of adjectives)

Howard's (2003) Two-Way Immersion Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric was used to examine the participants' writing evolution on the topic "My favourite season of the year". In examining this piece of journal writing, the participant primarily displayed progress within the scope examined in both languages. The researcher compared one of the participant's journal written in third grade which were written in both English and Japanese languages, and on the same topic. The analysis revealed that the participant's writing is grammatically correct in English and both journals have a clear subject matter. However, further analysis on the sentence formation, the researcher found that the participant's writing (e.g., sentence formation) was much shorter in Japanese and was not developed well. Furthermore, there were adjectives (e.g., hot) used in the participant's English writing (see Figure 1) to describe an object or phenomena compared to his Japanese writing whereby there was no adjective use (see Figure 2). Thus, the researcher speculates that the participant has possibly been trained to explain and express an experience or objects well in English since grade two at the Malaysia international school and has transferred this knowledge and awareness into his English writing.

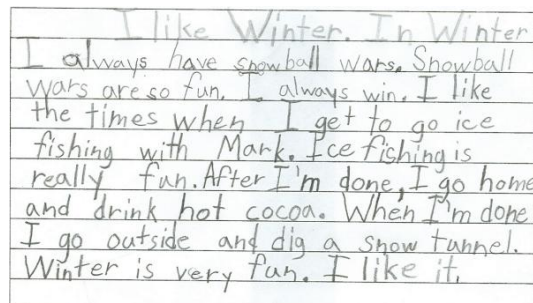


Figure 1: My favourite season of the year (English)

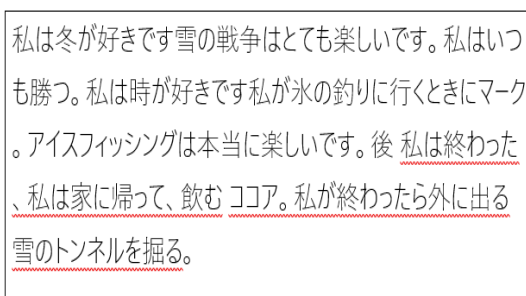


Figure 2: My favourite season of the year (Japanese)

Discussion

In this study, an attempt has been made to investigate the changes that occurred in a bilingual child's journals written in Japanese and English, and to explore if there has been any interaction between his writing skills of the two languages. The findings of the present study both contradict and support the findings gained by similar studies in the field (Chen & Myhill, 2016; Wallner, 2016).

The present study findings reveal that it is possible to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously. However, based on this study's analysis, there was no interaction between the participants' writing skills of the two languages - English and Japanese. This result contradicts with what Cummins (2000) had proposed whereby he suggested the writing competence of a bilingual child is interdependent. Yet, this is not visible in the participants' writing skills. Despite that, it may be argued instead that the overall differences between the two pieces of writing is clear for word count/used, adjectives usage, and logography errors.

From the journal analysis, the number of words used in English increases over the four years and there were adjectives used in the participants' English writing compared to his Japanese writing. In contrast, the logography errors, unlike the number of words used and adjective usage, were not counterbalanced. Hence, the number of logography errors in English writing made by the participant decreases over the four years on three different patterns (see Table 3). As shown in Table 3 above, the logography errors were made from simple words to more complicated words; from one syllable word to more; and no conventional spelling errors in second grade were found till the fourth grade. Thus, it seems to be the case that the participants' English has grown and became stronger compared to his Japanese language over the four years.

In support of bilingual education, many scholars have emphasized that positive environment and children's literacy development helps in biliteracy. In this study, even though the participant grew up in Japan and has been in the mainstream classroom since first grade where he is exposed to Japanese languages extensively, the participant learned to read and write English five days a week in an international school in Malaysia since second grade till now, fourth grade. The participants' mother also sent him to this Japanese weekend school, once a week in Malaysia to have them helped him to use his first language; Japanese.

Sanborn (2005) shed further light on supporting bilingual education when he proposed that children should be educated in their first language by teachers, and not their parents, even if it is only once a week. With all these arrangements, it is evident that the participant benefited greatly from schooling in both languages, whereby he had the opportunities to experience a Japanese school life every Saturday and being fully exposed to the language monolingual Japanese children use in school. In addition, another essential feature from this study was the participant teacher' encouragement that inspire and stimulate him to write an English journal every week since third grade. As a result, schooling in both languages has helped him to write in English and Japanese concurrently and proved that it is possible for a bilingual child to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously.

Limitations

Based on the scope of this study, there were some limitations that the researcher would like to highlight. Firstly, the main limitation of this study was the number of participant (only one participant) - a single case study. Secondly, the journal writing was not a formal writing. Thirdly, the participants' writing was not assessed inclusively (e.g., beginning, middle, end) of the school year in each grade level based on the same subject matter assigned in both English and Japanese.

Directions for future research

A future research adopting the method of this present study can be carried out in a bigger scale by involving more Japanese bilingual child in Malaysia or other countries to ascertain writing evolution in both languages - English and Japanese.

Another possible direction for future research could be longitudinal study of the bilingual child's evolution of writing, which could reveal how the interplay of writing evolution characteristics changes with age and language learning experience.

Conclusion

This study investigated a fourth-grade Japanese bilingual child's writing evolution in two different writing systems. In doing so, the participants' journals written in both English and Japanese were explored in terms of word count/used, logography errors, and writing evolution (e.g., subject matter, sentence formation, and usage of adjectives). Based on the present study findings, it can be concluded that the (i) participant has been acquiring writing skills in both English and Japanese language simultaneously based on the composition component of the Two-Way Immersion Narrative Writing Assessment Rubric; (ii) participants' writing is grammatically correct in English, and both English and Japanese journals have a clear subject matter; and (iii) participant has written poorly in his Japanese journals compared to his English journals. Thus, these findings point to the significance that schooling in two languages and early exposure of target language could have effectively supported the participant learning of writing skills.

Although Cummins (2000) studies indicated that bilinguals who gained knowledge in one language will use it when learning a second language, this is not visible in the participants' writing skills. Despite that, it may be argued instead that the overall differences between the two pieces of writing is clear for word count/used, adjectives usage, and logography errors. Hence, it is valuable to mention that even though the results from this study contradicts with what Cummins (2000) had indicated and the study is limited in the number of participant, this study is an example of successful evolution of bilingualism where it is possible for a bilingual child to acquire two different writing systems simultaneously and make a case for the importance of schooling in both languages.

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