

Writing processes of young bilinguals:
Lessons learned from classroom-based research

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the writing processes and development of eight young bilinguals from Spanish and English language backgrounds. The research was situated in two grade 1 classrooms in a dual language program in the Northeastern United States. Data were collected through classroom observations, student work, and interviews over a period of six months. The following research questions guided the study:

How do first-grade English-dominant and Spanish-dominant students develop as writers in a dual language program that employs a process writing approach?

- (a) What are the trends and patterns of bilingual writing processes and skills for English-dominant vs. Spanish-dominant children?
- (b) What is the nature of the transfer of writing skills and processes from one language to the other?
- (c) How are first and second languages used by these developing bilingual writers?

Findings suggest that access to two languages and support for bilingualism and biliteracy affects both the processes of writing and the products developing bilingual children create. The phenomena of positive literacy application, interliteracy, and strategic codeswitching were evident through children's talk, texts, and writing behaviors. These findings led to a preliminary model of bilingual writing that provides a basis for continued exploration and study of bilingual writers and their development.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, knowledge about children's use of written language in mainstream U.S. educational contexts has increased dramatically; in contrast, the topic of biliteracy has not been widely studied. A review of published literature revealed little research on biliteracy development in early elementary classroom settings. Most writing research on bilingual students has looked at one language or the other (usually English), focused on products of writing vs. process, or on older students who either have already developed literacy in their native language or have developed literacy in the second language only. This leaves many unanswered questions about the acquisition of biliteracy in young children for whom language and literacy are still in the developing stages.

This qualitative study builds upon and extends research on emergent biliteracy development. Specifically, it investigates the writing processes of young, developing bilingual and biliterate children as they compose stories in two languages in a Writing Workshop (WW) context within a Two Way Bilingual Education (TWBE) program. A TWBE program integrates native-English speakers and students who speak another language and offers both groups the opportunity to develop bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural understanding. The following research questions guided the study:

How do first-grade English-dominant and Spanish-dominant students develop as writers in a TWBE program that employs a process writing approach?

- (a) What are the trends and patterns of bilingual writing processes and skills?
- (b) What is the nature of the transfer of writing skills and processes from one language to the other?
- (c) How are first and second languages used by these developing bilingual writers?

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's (1986) understanding of the relationship and interdependency of a bilingual's two languages suggests a theoretical basis for investigating the linguistic and literacy processes of bilingual students. Recent research in bilingualism (Muñoz-Sandoval, Cummins, Alvarado, & Rueda, 1998) indicates that the bilingual student brings to learning a linguistic repertoire that cannot be measured in a single language. Regardless of the language they are using and their particular proficiency level, bilinguals are influenced by their knowledge of another language and their cross-cultural experience. This understanding of the bilingual as "an integrated whole which cannot be easily decomposed into two separate parts" (Grosjean, 1989, p. 6) is based on what Grosjean has called the wholistic view of the bilingual. As such, children who can read and write in two languages or make use of two languages in any modality are exceptional sources of information on language and literacy processes in general.

Cummins (1991) proposed the phenomenon of transfer, through the "Linguistic Interdependence Principle," in which academic skills, literacy development, concept formation, subject knowledge, and learning strategies transfer from the native language (L1) to the second language (L2) as the vocabulary and communicative patterns are developed in L2 to express that academic knowledge. Based on this notion, a growing body of research suggests that L1 writing forms the basis of new hypotheses for L2 writing (Au, 1993; Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 1996; Edelsky, 1982; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1996; Snow, 1990; Tinajero & Ada, 1993).

Method

Setting

The study was situated in two first grade classrooms in a Spanish/English TWBE program, in an urban, culturally-diverse, K-5 elementary school in the northeastern United States. The school was a diverse community of learners representative of the surrounding community. With the city's highest percentage of limited English proficient students (41.8%), the ethnic make-up of the student body was

45% Anglo, 53% Latino, and 2% African-American. Forty-one percent of the students participated in the free/reduced lunch program, representing one of the city's highest percentages of low-income students.

The study focused on Writing Workshop (WW) in each of the two classrooms, a 45-60 minute period of the day in which students wrote in either English or Spanish. Ten to twelve students participated in WW at a time, while the other half of the class attended either Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) class. The Process Writing Approach employed during WW was closely aligned with the teachings of Graves (1983a) and Calkins (1983, 1986). As implemented in the focal classrooms, the approach stressed the notion of writing as a craft in which the writer engages in a number of individual and interactive stages as she develops an idea and expresses it in writing. The particular classroom in which the activity occurred (i.e., English or Spanish room), determined the language of instruction, and therefore the language of children's texts.

The Teachers

The teachers in these two first-grade classrooms were experienced elementary educators who held views about literacy learning reflective of emergent literacy and process writing perspectives. At the time of the study, the Spanish teacher had been teaching first grade within the TWBE program for a period of 7 years and held a Masters Degree in Bilingual Education. She was of Mexican and Anglo descent, and a bilingual Spanish/English-speaker from birth.

The English teacher was a native English-speaker of European descent who had been teaching first grade for over ten years. Although she had worked with English language learners in her previous classroom position, this was her first year in the TWBE program. She had a basic understanding and command of the Spanish language and was knowledgeable of second language acquisition theory, processes, and teaching methodology.

The Children

With the help of the classroom teachers and the school's biliteracy specialist, four English-dominant students and four Spanish-dominant students were selected for this study. Selection for the study was based on students' L1 literacy levels and L2 proficiency levels. Students' language dominance, or language of greater proficiency (Baker, 2000), and program placement were determined by school-administered standardized language proficiency assessments. Native language literacy levels (high, average, low) were determined by current classroom and school assessment measures and teachers' ratings of students' general literacy skills, and supported by student work to date. Based on these measures, at least one high L1-literacy student was selected from each language for participation in the study; no low L1-literacy students were selected for participation. Participants' names, ages at beginning of data collection, native and dominant languages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant information

Name	Age	Native language	Dominant language
Lucielle	6:3	Spanish	Spanish
Katherine	6:8	Spanish	Spanish
Brian	7:0	Spanish	Spanish
Jennifer	6:10	Spanish	Spanish
Jeremy	6:11	English	English
Steven	7:1	Bilingual English/Spanish	English
Jahziel	6:11	Bilingual English/Spanish	English
Barbara	6:5	Spanish	English

Data Collection

For six months, the researcher and two research assistants observed and interviewed focal students and collected writing samples from Spanish and English WWs. Throughout the duration of the study, researchers were participant observers in the two classrooms. As participant observers, they watched and talked with the students as they went about their daily WW activities. At no time during this period, however, did the researchers engage in any direct instruction of the children. Research assistants received training in qualitative data collection methods and procedures; these procedures were systematically reviewed and verified for consistency across researchers during bi-weekly research meetings involving the author, research assistants, participating teachers, and the school's biliteracy specialist. Following are more specific descriptions of the data collection process.

Observations

In any given week throughout the duration of the study, researchers collected data systematically on three occasions for each focal child: either twice in Spanish WW and once in English WW, or vice versa. During 45 to 60 minute classroom visits, researchers observed focal children in all aspects of the act of writing, focusing on what they did and said. Researchers took detailed field notes of participant activities and audiotaped participant, peer, and teacher conversations and discussions. A bilingual writing profile was created for each child, based on these observations and grounded in the work of Bear and Barone (1998), Clay (2001), Morris (1993), and Sulzby (1985). These profiles were compiled by teasing out from field notes, transcripts, interviews, and written artifacts any evidence of a child's cross-linguistic and language-specific writing processes, behaviors, and development. The profiles, as well as all field notes, were shared with the teachers for accuracy. The teachers often contributed additional information that helped to refine our understanding of the writing development of individual children.

Interviews

Researchers interviewed the focal children systematically once every two weeks at the end of a WW session in order to have the children further reflect on their writing processes and behaviors. Interviews with focal children were also audiotaped and lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Artifacts

Researchers collected and photocopied all student writing samples in L1 and L2 from all stages of the writing process created during the six-month study period. Data sources collected throughout the duration of the study consisted of: 327 student writing samples; audio tapes of individual focal students from 64 Spanish and 62 English WWs; field notes of observations during above-mentioned activities; audio tapes of 73 formal and informal interviews with focal children; and field notes of observations taken during student interviews.

Data Analysis

Initial analyses occurred throughout the data collection period during bi-weekly research meetings including researchers, classroom teachers, and the school's biliteracy specialist. All data sources were initially coded and analyzed with attention to stage of the writing process, behaviors/strategies observed, language of interaction/text, aspects of form and mechanics, and meaning. In-depth coding was based on the First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum (WDC), a widely used writing assessment and teaching tool that had been adopted by the teachers in this school system to document children's writing development (for a detailed description of the First Steps WDC and a listing of the individual indicators, see Raison & Rivalland, 1994).

Triangulation of data from the multiple data sources provided a comprehensive view of emergent bilingual writing behaviors, verified themes and patterns, and cross-validated the regularities in the data.

Within and cross-case analyses (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were conducted in order to reveal patterns of bilingual writing process and development unique to Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students, as well as patterns of processes and development exhibited by both groups. In addition, member-checking and peer examination occurred amongst the research team members during bi-weekly research meetings throughout the duration of the study.

Findings

This section describes general findings representing patterns across all cases. In order to maintain consistency with children's instructional/language placements (based on language dominance), L1 refers to a student's dominant language, while L2 refers to the non-dominant language.

Strategic Codeswitching

Developing bilingual writers used their full linguistic repertoire in the process of creating L1 and L2 texts. With few exceptions (e.g., vocabulary that is related to American popular culture, names of places, restaurants, theme parks, etc., that have no equivalent in the other language), the texts developing bilingual children created were monolingual. Some examples of lexical codeswitches are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of written codeswitches in Katherine's (Spanish-dominant student) writing.

Katherine's original written codeswitch and/or loan word	Standard English Orthography	Possible Spanish version
<i>Disney world</i>	<i>Disney World</i>	<i>el mundo de Disney</i>
<i>qucau</i>	<i>cookout</i>	<i>barbacoa</i>
<i>bresap</i>	<i>dress-up</i>	<i>juego de vestirse</i>
<i>Storatlaro</i>	<i>Stuart Little</i>	<i>Stuart el pequeno</i>
<i>pisa</i>	<i>pizza</i>	<i>(no direct translation)</i>

In contrast, the writing processes of these developing bilingual writers were clearly bilingual to different degrees. Spanish-dominant and English-dominant children exhibited different patterns in their oral use of strategic codeswitching, depending on several different factors. All Spanish-dominant children used both languages in the process of creating Spanish texts; some also used both languages in the process of creating English texts.

English-dominant children, however, were only observed to codeswitch between their two languages while creating Spanish texts. Thus, children's ability and facility to codeswitch was contingent upon several factors, including the relative strength of L1 and L2 (i.e., language dominance), their bilingual development, the linguistic context, and the corresponding language proficiencies of the interlocutor(s).

Positive Literacy Application

Developing bilingual writers appropriately applied skills learned/used in one language to the other language. Most processes/skills exhibited by each of these developing bilingual writers were applied cross-linguistically and were related to the processes of encoding, spelling, monitoring, punctuation, capitalization, editing, and revising. Two types of processes/skills were observed within this phenomenon. First, emergent processes/skills are defined here as processes and skills that are developmental and temporary. For Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students, emergent literacy processes and skills first appeared in the L1, then in both L1 and L2, then in L2 and then in neither language. Second, mature literacy processes and skills are defined as those that once learned or acquired are maintained. For Spanish-dominant and English-dominant children, the application pattern exhibited

was from dominant language to the other language. In both cases, application was contingent upon a developing student’s biliterate development.

One example of parallel emergent and mature literacy processes/skills exhibited by an English-dominant student, Barbara, involved her developing knowledge of English and Spanish print conventions. Before Barbara had command of the basic rules of punctuation, she was observed to overuse linking words such as “and”/“y” to join simple sentences (i.e., an emergent process/skill). As her knowledge of print conventions and the rules of punctuation in each language developed, Barbara began to punctuate simple sentences more effectively and consistently, while experimenting with various linking words (e.g., then, the next day, and) to connect her ideas (mature process/skill).

Interliteracy

In addition, developing bilingual writers inappropriately applied language-specific elements of literacy of one language to the other. Interliteracy is defined here as the written language parallel to a developing bilingual’s oral interlanguage (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1992). This phenomenon of developing bilingual writing has two components: the temporary misapplication of linguistic elements of literacy of one language to the other, and the misapplication of print conventions of one language to the other. Several examples, representing each of the components of interliteracy, are presented below (misapplications are underlined for emphasis in each example).

Table 3. Representative sample of Spanish-dominant student’s misapplication of sentence structure from Spanish to English

Jennifer’s misapplication of sentence structure from Spanish to English	Standard English orthography	Acceptable English version
We whata to <u>the housu of my ands.</u>	We went to the house of my aunt’s.	We went to my aunt’s house.
We salovoraete <u>the bordae of my mom.</u>	We celebrate the birthday of my mom.	We celebrated my mom’s birthday.
Thae gefe porasans to <u>the baeby off my ans.</u>	They give presents to the baby of my aunt’s.	They gave my aunt’s baby presents.

Table 4. Representative sample of Spanish-dominant student’s misapplication of sound-symbol relationships from Spanish to English

Jennifer’s invented spellings in L2-context	Standard English orthography
luc <u>a</u> t	look at
cl <u>o</u> u <u>s</u>	clothes
min <u>e</u> s	minutes
s <u>i</u>	see
g <u>o</u>	go
par <u>i</u>	party
t <u>u</u>	too
Lir <u>o</u>	little

Example of English-dominant student's misapplication of an English language wiring convention to Spanish writing (orthographic rule—"silent 'e'")

[Researcher's Note: Steven is in the process of drafting a story. He is not sure how to spell "fuimos" (we went), so he takes out a spelling sheet to learn the word.]

Steven: *(sounding out on spelling sheet) ¡Fui... mos!*
 (Researcher's Note: Steven wrote "fuimos", then added silent "e"
 at end of word; word now spelled "fuimose")
 (rereading) Fui...mos

Steven, February 29, Spanish WW

Example of English-dominant student's misapplication of an English print convention (capitalizing the first person singular, "I") to its Spanish equivalent; also, misapplication of English sentence structure to Spanish writing (possessive word order)

"Cuando Yo durmi ande LiLianas casa."

Barbara, March 17, Spanish WW

The two components of interliteracy appeared to have somewhat different patterns of application. First, the misapplication of language-specific elements of literacy first occurred in L1-only, then occurred temporarily in both L1 and L2, and then in L1-only for both Spanish- and English-dominant students. Second, the misapplication of print conventions seemed to have a dual pattern of transfer for Spanish-dominant students. Initially, these students applied language-specific print conventions in L1, then in both L1 and L2, and then in L1-only. In addition, some Spanish-dominant students applied language-specific print conventions in English-only, then temporarily in both English and Spanish, and then in English-only. The latter transfer pattern was also the expected one for English-dominant students. Interliteracy was contingent upon both bilingual and biliterate development.

Discussion

Results from the present study begin to fill some of these gaps in our current understanding of cross-linguistic literacy application of literacy skills and processes as analyses yielded several important insights into bilingual writing: in the process of creating texts, developing bilingual writers (1) use their full linguistic repertoire when creating texts; (2) apply developmentally appropriate processes/skills cross-linguistically; and (3) may temporarily misapply linguistic elements and writing conventions of one language to the other. Taken together, these findings suggest a working model of bilingual writing development (see Table 5 below). This model is described in the next section.

Table 5. Preliminary model of bilingual writing development for Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students in a Two-Way program

Phenomenon	Definition Relative to this Model	Contingent upon	Expectation for Spanish-dominant Student in a Partial Immersion Two-Way Program	Expectation for English-dominant Student in a Partial Immersion Two-Way Program
I. Strategic Code-switching	Use of one language while engaged in the process of writing the other	Relative strength of L1 and L2 (language dominance); bilingual development; linguistic context; language proficiencies of interlocutor	Use of L1 while composing in English <i>and/or</i> use of English while composing in L1	Use of English while composing in L2
A. <i>Oral codeswitching</i>	Oral use of one language while engaged in the process of writing the other	(same as above)	Use of oral L1 while composing in English and/or use of oral English while composing in L1	Use of oral English while composing in L2
B. <i>Written (lexical) codeswitches</i>	Written use of one language while engaged in the process of writing the other	(same as above)	Use of written English while composing in L1	Use of written English while composing in L2
II. Positive Literacy Application	Developmentally appropriate application of cross-linguistic processes/skills	Relative strength in L1 and L2 literacy (biliterate development)	(see below)	(see below)
A. <i>Application of emergent literacy processes and skills</i>	Developmental and temporary processes, skills (these disappear and/or develop into developmentally mature literacy processes/skills)	(same as above and opportunity)	What initially occurs in L1-only, occurs next in both languages, then in English only, then in neither (or) What initially occurs in L1-only, occurs next in both languages, then in neither	What initially occurs in English-only, occurs next in both languages, then in L2-only, then in neither (or) What initially occurs in English-only, occurs next in both languages, then in neither
B. <i>Application of mature literacy processes and skills</i>	Processes, skills once learned/acquired are maintained (eventually in both languages)	(same as above and opportunity)	What initially occurs in L1-only then occurs in both languages	What initially occurs in English-only then occurs in both languages

Phenomenon	Definition Relative to this Model	Contingent upon	Expectation for Spanish-dominant Student in a Partial Immersion Two-Way Program	Expectation for English-dominant Student in a Partial Immersion Two-Way Program
III. Interliteracy	Temporary inappropriate application of linguistic elements and writing conventions of one language to other language	Bilingual development & biliterate development (i.e., relative strength of L1/L2, and relative strength of L1/L2 literacy)	(see below)	(see below)
A. <i>Misapplication of language-specific linguistic elements of literacy</i>	Temporary inappropriate application of linguistic elements of writing (i.e., syntax, phonology, semantics)	Bilingual development (i.e., relative strength of L1 and L2)	What initially occurs in L1-only, occurs temporarily in both L1 and English, and then in L1-only	What initially occurs in English-only, occurs temporarily in both English and L2, and then in English-only
B. <i>Misapplication of language-specific writing conventions</i>	Temporary inappropriate application of writing conventions (i.e., graphophonemic relationships, orthography, print conventions)	Biliterate development (i.e., relative strength of L1 and L2 literacy)	What initially occurs in L1-only, occurs temporarily in both L1 and English, and then in L1-only and (possibly) what initially occurs in English-only, occurs temporarily in both L1 and English, and then in English-only	What initially occurs in English-only, occurs temporarily in both English and L2, and then in English-only

Model of Bilingual Writing Development

The model of bilingual writing development presents phenomena unique to bilingual writers, specifying particular types of processes/skills that are applied cross-linguistically, relates these to bilingualism and biliteracy, and proposes anticipated transfer patterns for Spanish-dominant and English-dominant developing bilingual writers.

Strategic Codeswitching During the Writing Process

All developing bilingual children codeswitched in the process of composing texts. Patterns of codeswitching were related to the classroom or language context, a child’s language dominance, and the interlocutor’s target language proficiency. Most Spanish-dominant children codeswitched in both Spanish and English contexts, while one child only codeswitched in the Spanish context. Homza (1995) found related patterns of codeswitching for Spanish-dominant bilingual writers. That is, regardless of the language of the text, the children’s other language was typically involved in the writing process to some degree.

On the other hand, English-dominant children only codeswitched in the Spanish context. These bilingual writers used both languages while writing in L2 to monitor their writing and to ask questions during writing (Halsall, 1986; Hudelson, 1989). The least Spanish-proficient child rehearsed in English whether creating text in English or Spanish. Homza (1995) found a similar pattern in Spanish-dominant

children of low English-proficiency: children prepared stories in the native language whether the target language of the text was L1 or L2.

In contrast to patterns of oral language use around the creation of text, developing bilingual children understood text to be mostly monolingual. When lexical codeswitches did occur, they were highly consistent with classroom oral language patterns: students generally did not codeswitch to Spanish in English essays but did codeswitch to English in some of the Spanish essays (Howard & Christian, 1997). Written codeswitches were usually related to American popular culture or proper names of places children had visited for which no equivalent term existed in the other language (e.g., Pokemon, Disney World).

One other type of lexical codeswitch occurred in Spanish texts only. Some children used Spanish hybrid terms stemming from English words [e.g., Katherine's use of "qucao" (cookout) and Steven's use of "deiqueal" (daycare)]. Homza (1995) also found that children frequently used loan words in their Spanish texts that were related to their experiences in English. Children's use of these types of words illustrate not only the influence of English on the Spanish lexicon, but, more important, that these children have learned common colloquialisms from their Dominican-American community. This suggests at least an early sociolinguistic competence on their part (Reyes, 2001).

Positive Literacy Application

Bilingual children in the present study developed spontaneous biliteracy, that is, the acquisition of literacy in Spanish and English without formal instruction in both languages (Reyes, 2001). Like the children in Homza's (1995) study, these Spanish-dominant and English-dominant children had been receiving literacy instruction only in their dominant language prior to the current study. Yet, when the children began writing in both languages, they employed the majority of their writing-related behaviors and skills cross-linguistically. They were developing two written language systems by applying what they knew about L1 writing to L2 writing. In sum, they applied specific hypotheses, more general strategies, and abstract knowledge about language and literacy to both languages (Edelsky, 1989).

The current findings suggest that developing bilingual children's cross-linguistic strategies and behaviors involve emergent literacy processes/skills. These temporary behaviors have been documented in earlier studies of young monolingual writers (Childers, 1981; Clay, 1977; Graves, 1983b; Sipe, 1998). In the current study, both Spanish-dominant and English-dominant developing bilingual writers applied monitoring strategies cross-linguistically. Edelsky (1989) also documented these types of temporary literacy scaffolds that provide children opportunities to construct, revise, and abandon hypotheses in her work with young Spanish-dominant writers in a Transitional Bilingual Education program.

Current findings indicate that emergent literacy processes either disappear or develop into mature literacy processes. Mature processes/skills involve behaviors that once learned are maintained (e.g., conventional punctuation, spelling). Similarly, Sipe (1998) found that monolingual children's outward expression of cognitive processes during writing become internalized as they learn to control the processes of encoding. Once their verbalization and metacognition become internalized, children begin to focus more on the meaning of the text they are creating.

Interliteracy

Cummins (1991) suggests that transfer primarily involves conceptual knowledge. In the current study, young bilingual writers applied several language-specific linguistic elements of literacy and/or print conventions to the other language in the process of developing two written language systems. L1 and/or L2 writing samples of some Spanish-dominant and English-dominant children showed characteristics of transitional writing (Routman, 1994). That is, while much of the writing was standard, there was still use of inventive spelling and inconsistency in use of punctuation as these young writers

were still developing their languages and literacy in these languages. Like the children in Reyes' (2001) study, invented spelling in L2 sometimes relied on L1 phonology. Some Spanish-dominant children also misapplied English-specific sound-symbol correspondence to Spanish text.

The phenomenon of interliteracy, or the inappropriate application of language-specific elements of literacy, is contingent upon a student's bilingual and biliterate development and is parallel to their oral interlanguage. Interliteracy, thus, represents growth of biliteracy and *not* a backward developmental progression. That is, when children misapply language-specific elements they are exhibiting general literacy knowledge, although they may not know particular elements or conventions of one of their languages. As their languages develop and literacy in those languages advances, the occurrence of interliteracy diminishes and will likely disappear.

Conclusion

The current findings suggest that access to two languages and support for bilingualism and biliteracy affects both the processes of writing and the products developing bilingual children create. The phenomena of positive literacy application, interliteracy, and strategic codeswitching were evident through children's talk, texts, and writing behaviors during the writing process. These findings suggest a preliminary model of bilingual writing that provides a basis for continued exploration and study of bilingual writers and their development.

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