

## **Early letter writing: Constructing bilingual and bi-cultural identity**

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Letter writing can be an important and effective means of children's written language development. Our study supports this argument made by Collerson (1983) and Robinson, et al. (1992) who analysed children's English mother tongue letter writing. In children of a LOTE background, writing letters in their home language acquires a particular significance, as a means of promoting their minority language competence as well as constructing their bilingual and bi-cultural identity (Taft 1981; Norton 1995, 1997, 1998). Our study demonstrates that this is so by examining a bilingual child's letters in both her languages written over the first four years of primary schooling. Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994) has been used for a detailed linguistic analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Today I'll be speaking about letter writing by a bilingual child, as a means of developing her bilingual literacy as well as constructing her bi-cultural identity.

It is only fairly recently that bilingual studies came to address such issues as the importance of emotional contact between children and their families in shaping their balanced bilingual and bi-cultural identities. When we say that a person has a bilingual and bi-cultural identity, we mean that he or she identify themselves with both cultures and are accepted as one of them by members of these cultures.

A notion that simultaneous bilinguals, that is people who have been exposed to two languages from an early age and thus having developed a reasonable control of those languages, have a potential to develop a bi-cultural identity was introduced by Taft (1981). He argues that simultaneous bilinguals can make efficient inter-cultural mediators, which acquires particular significance in our age of migration (Castles & Miller 1993). Norton (Pierce 1995; Norton 1997), in her studies of minorities' "acculturation" in Canada also highlights the desirability of their minority tongue maintenance as an important means of shaping their cultural identity. She found that in cases where minority children were allowed to develop their native tongue alongside the majority language, they were generally happier in their family life and in socialisation outside the family.

In this paper, we shall provide evidence for the argument that letter writing can be an important and effective means of children's written language development (Collerson 1983;

Robinson, et al. 1992). It will be argued that this is particularly true in cases of LOTE background children, developing literacy in both their languages, given the limited real life purposes for minority language writing. We shall show that letter writing in bilinguals' home language can be one of the effective avenues of minority literacy development. We shall also argue that in children of a LOTE background, letter writing in their mother tongue acquires a particular significance, as a means of constructing their bilingual and bi-cultural identity (Cummins 1996; Norton 1998).

This study of early bilingual writing was inspired by the studies in the social-interactional tradition which stresses the interactional nature of all learning (Wood 1988; Wertsch 1984; Vygotsky 1978), learning language (Halliday 1975; Painter 1984; Oldenburg 1990), and learning through language (Hasan 1986; Painter 1993). Inspirations also came from those bilingual studies that highlighted the minority language maintenance as being crucial in maintaining familial interactions (Norton 1995, 1997; Wong Fillmore 1991a,b).

## 2. Method

The subject of this study is an English-Russian simultaneously bilingual child Anna who was born in Russia, but arrived to live in Australia from an early age. All texts which she wrote in both her languages over the period of almost five years from pre-school through Grade 3 in school were collected and analysed using the Systemic Functional grammar (SFG) as proposed by Halliday (1994). This paper will report some findings uncovered in the examination of the child's letter writing.

As has been stated, we aim to show, firstly, that letter writing stimulates the child's developing control over written language by providing real purposes and challenges, and, secondly, that the bilingual child's writing letters in her two languages helps construct her bilingual and bi-cultural identity. To demonstrate that this is the case, we shall examine letters in both her tongues written by Anna over the first four years of primary schooling. The focus will be on the child's developing choices in the Transitivity system, as the primary grammatical resource of language that builds its experiential metafunction. The linguistic system of Transitivity specifies the different kinds of processes in which people engage to get things done, as well as participants and associated circumstances (Halliday 1994:106). Thus, by examining the child's choices of Processes, Participants and Circumstances we shall be able to see what experiences she chooses to talk about in her letters, and how these experiences are revealing the child's cultural identity. Because letter writing is a two-way process, and the child's letters were often stimulated by her parents' expectations, as well as in many cases, by her correspondents, we can speak about letter writing as a process which does not only reflect, but also helps construct the child's bi-cultural identity. The child's growing control of written language will be revealed in her expanding repertoire of Transitivity choices, with the emergence of the Circumstance and the increase in complexity of the nominal group structure as a means of constructing both Circumstances and Participants.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. English letter writing: participating in literate practices of community and society

English letters written by the child are not very numerous (there have been collected about a dozen over the four year period, excluding greeting cards). Letters written in English are however important to consider, as they reveal the child's sense of belonging to and learning to participate in the English-speaking literate practices. To illustrate, we shall reproduce four of the child's English letters written over the period to different kinds of audience on differing purposes.

Text EL1 (age 5:6; grade Prep.)

Dear Margot

The eggs were delicious.

Thank you.

Love. Anna and Eugene.

The above example is a "thank-you" letter to a father's colleague. The letter relates gratitude (politeness), also showing some solidarity with the addressee.

The text below is a letter to a peer whose parents had gone to work in Fiji:

Text EL2 (age 6:3; grade 1)

Dear Zach

I hope you are having a good time.

How are you?

We are fine.

What kind of house do you have?

Do you still ride a horse?

Love Anna

The letter relates friendship and solidarity. The child shows interest in her friend's life, writing as a member of the boy's peer group.

The above letters (written in Grades Prep. and 1) are concerned primarily with maintaining interpersonal relationship, with not so much field information being related. For example, there is no use of Circumstance. Later letters, apart from being longer, are more complex grammatically. In the Transitivity, there emerges the Circumstance, of which several examples are used in Text EL3 which is a letter to a neighbour independently initiated and completed by the child (Circumstances location:place are underlined and Circumstance of matter is in italics):

Text EL3 (age 9:0; grade 4)

Dear Eric

Do not be worried about your dogs

they are at our place, after I found them beyond the boundary of the fence.

We tried to open the gate to let them in

but it was locked.

And they were in a big trouble

because they went on the road, went into neighbours' gardens and got kicked out.

So your dogs are at our place, now waiting to get picked up.

Bye. Anna, Eugene and Marina Aidman

P.S. We live 7 Semillon Grove

(opposite your house)

The nominal groups constructing some of the Circumstances are fairly complex having an embedded phrase in the Qualifier position in the functional analysis as proposed by Halliday (1994):

beyond the boundary [of the fence].

Deictic Thing Qualifier

Letter EL3 clearly shows the child's feelings of sympathy and solidarity with the neighbour, and reflects her sense of local community membership.

The fourth letter to be considered here is addressed to a local government official, and was created in a quasi-real situation. The letter was written in school in response to the teacher set task of writing a letter to some person in authority, voicing one's concern about some matter. The teacher suggested complaining about the choice of TV programs for children, the topic picked up by the majority of the class. Anna however preferred to make her own choice of the issue to be raised with the authorities.

Text EL4 (age 8:8; grade 3)

To Victorian Education Association

(Dear Sir - inserted by teacher)

I know you help children's education, so there's something you should help with.

Lots of children from grade Prep. to grade 2 (sometimes grades 3-6 too) throw their lunches in the bin.

I think a meeting should be held for parents.

Parents should understand that they should send healthy food, but if children hate it, they (the children) will not eat it.

You should not get angry if your children do not eat their lunches,

or they will say they ate it, but really put it in the bin.

Sincerely yours,

Anna Aidman

Letter EL4 demonstrates the child's developing control of writing in a number of ways. In the Transitivity, there emerge mental processes of cognition used to project the writer's and third party participants' thoughts:

I know you help children's education;

Pro:cognitive Projected clause

I think a meeting should be held for parents;

Pro:cognitive Projected clause

Parents should understand that they should send healthy food.

Pro:cognitive Projected clause

Such concern with participants' mental activities is new in the child's letters, and is therefore significant developmentally, allowing as it does to construct not only the world of concrete material actions but the inner world of people.

Letter EL4 reveals the child's ability to argue her point, whereby she voices her concern about some parents' behaviour, and calls upon an action from what she thinks a responsible office-holder. Here Anna performs as an Australian citizen who cares about some educational matters and is aware of her right to make suggestions to authorities, and is prepared to use this right.

Overall, English letters reveal the child's learning to participate in literate practices of the English-speaking culture, using letter writing for a variety of purposes - from reaffirming solidarity with peers through maintaining friendly neighbourhood relations to more official written communication.

### 3.2. Russian letters: participating in the minority literate practices and revealing the child's bi-cultural membership

The very fact of the child's reliance on letters as a means of maintaining interpersonal contacts is culturally embedded, since letter writing has strong roots in the Russian literate culture into which the child has been "apprenticed", primarily by her mother and grandparents. As a result, the child would keep in contact by means of letter writing not only with overseas relatives, but also with Russian-speaking relatives and friends living around Australia. She would also write letters to her mother, in the absence of immediate physical contact (for example, in cases when the mother was away attending seminars or conferences).

When addressing relatives, the child continuously reaffirms her emotional contact with and positive affect towards her correspondents. In her letters to grandparents, for example, from age 5 there emerges a theme of love and care. This is apparent in Transitivity choices of mental processes of affect and perception (underlined):

Text RL1 (age 5:6; grade Prep.)

???????? ??????

? ???? ??????

? ? ?????? ????? ?? ????? ???????????????.

Dear granny

I love you

and I want to care for you very much.

Text RL2 (age 5:9; grade Prep.)

???????? ??????? M???

??? ?? ????? ??????????????

????????????? ?????????? ??????? ???????.

? ???? ??????

Dear granny Mila

How are you feeling?

Please prepare your warm clothes.

I love you

In many letters the child reaffirms links between herself and her correspondents, as well as between her life and theirs. The theme of going and inviting for a visit is continuous, as will be seen from the following letters to grandmothers:

Text RL3 (age 7:8; grade 2)

???????? ???????

...

??? ??? ????????? (????? ?? ??????????) ? ?????? ??? ? ????????,

???????????? ? ???? ? ??? ?????? ??????????

Dear granny

...

It is more convenient for us (if you come) in January or in December,

for I have holidays at this time.

Text RL4 (age 8:6; grade 3)

???????? ??????

...

? ?????????? ???, <>, ? ?????????????? ?????? ?? ????? ? ?????? ????? ???

Dear granny

...

Next time <> I will by all means go to the dacha (country cottage) and help you there

The theme of the child offering help is obvious. Also apparent is Anna's awareness of a country where her grandparents live and something of their life styles. Meanwhile the child's home is in Australia. The theme of home emerges early on (in Grade Prep.) and initially includes the immediate family and the house in which the child lives in Australia. The child's feeling good and cosy about her home is revealed in her description of her place:

Text RL5 (5:6; grade Prep.)

???????? ??? ??????

? ??? ????? ????????? ??????????

?? ????? ? ?????? ??????.

Dear grandpa Vovka

We have a (nice) little wooden heater.

We are living in a cosy little house.

As is seen from the above examples, the participants in the child's early letters are herself and her grandparents. There are hardly any Circumstances used - the only one type is the Circumstance of location: place ? ?????? ?????? (in a cosy little house) to relate the child's place of residence.

In Grades 2 and 3, the theme of home begins to extend beyond the child's house, first into the family's back yard, and then to Australia land more generally. This is signalled in the choice of the participants and circumstances of her texts: thus, the child moves from specific participants, from relating herself as the principal participant, and "you" the addressee, onto relating third parties' experiences. The participants become more general, as the child speaks about fauna and flora of her land:

Text RL 6 (age 7:3; grade 2)

? ?????????? ?????? ????? ? ?????????,

??? ?????????? ?????????? ??????????.

? ?????????? ?????????? ?????????? ??????????.

In Australia there are many koalas and kangaroos,  
these are native animals of Australia.

In Australia the native trees are eucalypts.

Text RL 7 (age 8:0; grade 3)

????????????? ???? ????? ? ????? ??????????,

??? ??? ??? ? ????

The majority of koalas live in the state of Victoria,  
right where I live

While continuously reaffirming her affection for overseas relatives, the child writes as if being called upon to report about life in Australia. She comes to position herself as an Australian resident who is aware of the distinction between "us" here, in Australia, and "you" over there, in Moscow, in Russia, etc. She confidently reports the information about her land, while politely inquiring about her correspondents' realities:

Text RL 8 (age 7:3; grade 2)

????????? ??????

...

?????????????? ?? ???? ? ?????????

Dear Nastya

...

Are the prices going up in Moscow?

The following is an excerpt from a letter to a Russian singer whom the child had never met but whose songs she admired:

Text RL 9 (age 7:11, grade 3)

???? ?????? ???.

? ?????????? ? ??????? ? ???????.

?????? ??? ???? 3 ????

? ?????????? ? ???????????.

? ???? ? ???????????, ?????????? ?? ???????????.

??? ?????? 8 ???.

? ????? ? ??????? ??????.

? ????? ?????? ?? ???????????

? ?????? ??????? ?????? ?? ??????.

My name is Anya.

I was born in Russia in Moscow.

When I was 3 years old

I arrived in Australia.

I live in Ballarat, not far from Melbourne.

I'm almost 8 years old.

I am in grade three.

I learn to play the piano

and have started to learn to play the guitar.

Letter RL9 reveals the child's awareness of her origin and her acceptance of the new place of residence. If anything, she sounds fairly matter-of-factly about her "trans-continental" move.

In a letter to a peer, Anna becomes even more specific in geographically placing her residence for her overseas correspondent. This is constructed in the use of the Circumstance of location:place (underlined):

? ??? ? ?????????, ????????? ?? ?????????, ? ????? ?????????.

I live in Ballarat, not far from Melbourne, in the state of Victoria.

More importantly however, personal letters come to reveal her feelings of security about and attachment to the area where she lives:

Text RL13 (age 8:10; grade 3)

? ?????, ????????? ????? ?????????.

? ????????? ?????? ???. On the whole, Ballarat is very quiet.

You can't get that in Melbourne.

As a young Australian, the child instructs the Tooth Fairy (the role usually played by the mother) as to how she should behave in accordance with the rules of the local culture. The reference to the cultural tradition is constructed in the Circumstance of manner (underlined):

Text RL 11 (age 8:4; grade 3)

?? ?????????????? ?????????

?? ??????? ??????? ???????.

According to the Australian tradition,  
for a filling (there should be) an extra dollar.

It should be noted that Russian children do not typically have this income avenue.

One can feel the pride and involvement with which she reports some of the Australian experiences:

Text RL 12 (age 8:4; grade 3)

? ??? ??? ?????? ?????????? ?????????????.

In our country aborigines are already getting some help.

As she grows older, in Grade 3 letters she begins to take a stance as an Australian citizen commenting upon the country's political system, although in a fairly childish way, as the following excerpt from another letter to the Russian singer will demonstrate:

Text RL14 (8:8; grade 3)

? ?????? ?????

???? ? ????????????? ?????? ?????? ???????,

????? ?????????????? ?? ?????????????????????? ?????????????????.

????? ??? ?? ??????? ?????????????? ??????? ??? ?????????? ?? ?????? ?????????? ?????????????? ???????????.

? ?? ??????????????????. I'm very glad

that in Australia there will soon be elections,  
(people) will be voting for the independent state.

Because as you know Australia is now a monarchy headed by the English Queen.  
I'm for independence.

The child's dealing in more abstract matters has led to her using more sophisticated grammatical choices. As can be seen, some of the Participants in the above selection come to be realised in fairly complex nominal groups containing abstract nouns, a feature that was not there earlier:

????????? [[?? ?????? ?????????? ?????????????? ?????????????]]

(monarchy [[headed by the English Queen]])

Here are in fact a number of abstract notions being related in the above excerpt:

?????? (elections), ?????????????????? ?????????????? (independent state), ?????????? (monarchy), ?????????????????? (independence).

Such choices of the participants in the child's writing reveal her growing control of the written mode of her minority language.

The analysis of the child's letters also reveals that she keeps in touch not only with older family members and friends, but with children as well, writing about her own experiences and inquiring about their school, friends, teachers, pets and favourite sports - all those things that are of interest to children in western cultures. Consider the following excerpt from a letter to a cousin:

Text RL15 (age 8:1; grade 3)

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???????? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

???? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

???? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

???? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

How are you?

How many girls are there in your class?

What program do you have?

What subjects do you study?

What sport do you play?

Such correspondence of Anna's indicates her feelings of solidarity with Russian-speaking peers. Importantly, her contact is not one-sided - she has been receiving letters from a number of primary aged children, which is an indication of her being accepted by the Russian mother tongue peers as one of them. Thus, the child's view of herself as a young person of a Russian-speaking background gets reaffirmed.

### 3. Conclusions

The personal letter provided real social purposes for the child's meaning making in writing, and thus promoted her literacy learning in both her languages. Letter writing in the majority language allowed her to feel an accepted and important member of the community she was living in, whereas her ability to engage in letter writing in her home language allowed her to participate in the minority literate culture which would play an important role in constructing her bi-cultural identity.

It may be suggested, although our study did not directly address this issue, that the child's sustained bilingual development (enhanced by her becoming literate in the minority as well

as the majority languages) facilitated her adjustment to life in a new country in general, and to its academic contexts in particular. Overall, our study has demonstrated that letter writing can be an effective avenue of literacy development in both the child's languages, as well as of helping construct her bi-cultural identity. This will support the argument for desirability of promoting minority literacy learning in LOTE background children.

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