Writing in the minority language at home in Japan

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This paper focuses on teaching Minority Language writing at home to bicultural children attending Japanese elementary school in Japan. First, current research that promotes the benefits of developing literacy in the Minority Language is introduced. Secondly, the data collected from quantitative research involving 42 families with 86 bicultural children is analyzed with special attention to four areas: the age when the home-based writing lessons begin, the frequency of the lessons, the resource materials parents use and the sources of support. Finally, recommendations are made, including an example of one successful writing activity that is currently being utilized by numerous bicultural children living across Japan.

本論文では、両親の母語が異なり、日本の小学校に通う子供に、家庭で副言語のライティングを教えることに焦点を当てる。初めに、副言語における読み書き能力をつけることによるメリットを促進する、現在進行中の研究を紹介する。次に、42家族86人の子供が参加した量的研究から得られたデータを、以下の4つの点に注意しながら分析する：①家庭におけるライティングレッスンのスタート時の年齢；②レッスンの頻度；③親が使う元となる教材；④サポート元。最後に、ライティング活動におけるお薦めの方法をお伝えする。そこにおいて、多くの日本中に住む子供が現在使用して成功している、あるライティング活動について提案する。

The widespread recognition of the benefits of biliteracy has prompted some parents to take up the challenge of educating their bicultural children in the Minority Language at home. In Japan, where home schooling is almost unheard of and most elementary school children learn to write in Japanese, the Majority Language, a child who learns to write in two languages, the Minority Language at home and the Majority Language at school is even more unusual. Furthermore, due to increasing numbers of Japanese people choosing to marry foreigners and settle together in Japan, there are more bicultural children attending Japanese elementary schools where there is little or no support in teaching or maintaining minority language writing skills. As a result of this lack of support, bicultural children tend not to become literate in their Minority Language. Research done in the Japanese context by Noguchi (1996) and Yamamoto (1994, 1995) focused on the development of English speaking and reading skills of bicultural children. However, there is no current research focusing on the writing skills of such children in Japan. This paper will present the results of a survey of 42 bicultural families with elementary school children on Minority Writing lessons at home. The results will examine four areas in detail: the age when the home-based writing lessons began,

the frequency of the lessons, the resource materials parents used and the sources of support. Successful trends and recommendations will be highlighted.

Minority Language learning

Growing up writing in two languages is an invaluable asset. The ability to write and express oneself in the global language of English is a skill many native English-speaking parents in Japan wish to teach their bicultural children. Current research on biliteracy proposes that not only can children learn two languages simultaneously, but that doing so when the child is young results in several advantages. In her book on biliterate children, Kenner (2004) finds compelling evidence that the early years are an excellent time to learn about different writing systems because children's minds are at their most flexible. Besides the proven benefits of educational opportunities, creativity and divergent thinking, and cognitive flexibility, being biliterate can help children become accomplished communicators (Kenner, 2004; Sanborn, 2005; Diaz & Harvey, 2007; Schwartz, 2008). This is especially true for young children who have family members of another culture who write in a language other than Japanese. In her recent book, *Becoming biliterate: Young children learning different writing systems*, Kenner (2004) found that most children are keen to learn different languages and that literacies serve important purposes in their lives. The child who has access to writing tools in their minority language has more opportunities to develop relationships with extended family and friends, and in doing so learns about, and comes to value, the minority culture (Kabuto 2011). Children who not only learn the school language but also maintain their mother tongue grow up feeling well connected to their families, their communities and both their cultures (Kenner, 2004). A study by Cummins (2001) recommends the family spend time developing a strong home language before the child goes to school where they learn in the majority language. He finds that when children develop their abilities in two languages throughout elementary school, they gain a deeper understanding of language and learn how to use it more effectively. Children practise processing language more often when they develop literacy in both languages. There is also evidence that if they begin school with a solid foundation in their Minority Language they develop strong literacy in the language of school. Cummins thus advocates support of the Minority Language in school where possible. He also maintains that when the school rejects a child's Minority Language, it is as though a central part of "who" the child is (their identity), is being rejected. Furthermore, when a child experiences this rejection, he or she is much less likely to actively participate in the Majority Language classroom. Cummins goes as far as to suggest that teachers should encourage biliterate children to write in their mother tongue. In doing so, the culturally and linguistically diverse child will feel accepted and validated.

Research on bilingualism is complex and still in the early stages, however, so far, findings are clear on the importance of bicultural children's Minority Language for their overall personal and educational development. Scholars maintain that developing and maintaining the Minority Language is paramount to understanding their cultures and heritages and forming well-rounded identities, (Rumbaut, 1994; Toohey, 2000; Kenner, 2004). In a study with Asian bicultural children, Mills (2001) found that children's home languages were crucial for maintaining their sense of identity and membership of a different culture. In her recent book about her young English-Japanese biliterate child, Kabuto (2010) maintains that there exists a close relationship between literacy, identity and culture and insists that there is a compelling case for the role of the written language as an important cultural tool. Through her research she found that the availability of and access to such cultural tools can shape the child's experiences as readers and writers and help them along the journey toward becoming biliterate.

In Japan there are few opportunities for the young bicultural child to use their Minority Language outside the home, and therefore competence in it can become fragile and language attrition can occur within two or three years of starting school if the parents are not proactive in helping a child retain and develop it (Cummins, 2001). The child must be provided with ample opportunities to expand the functions in which they use the Minority Language, such as opportunities for Minority Language reading and writing. In a recent study conducted in Japan, Bingham (2007) found Minority Language attrition occurring with his own English-Japanese bilingual child and adamantly recommends teaching the child Minority Language literacy skills early on before they start school and when they have more time for the crucial input required (Reetz-Kurashige, 1999). Within the community and at most elementary schools in Japan there is little support offered for maintaining the Minority Language, and so foreign parents who are trying to teach their child to write in the Minority Language face this challenging task alone. Furthermore, since writing is not only the skill which children find hardest to acquire, but is also the hardest one for parents to teach, it thus often ends up being the area which is most neglected

Beginning the journey at home

Having been raised and educated in the multilingual and multicultural city of Vancouver, Canada, I have always perceived bilingualism to be a normal and natural lifestyle. Now that I am married to a Japanese national, living in Japan and have two children, we are trying to raise them as bicultural and our goal is that they become bilingual and bi-literate in English and Japanese. As their mother and primary caregiver, I became actively involved in developing their mother tongue from the time they were born. Instead of going to Japanese play school, we spent our time playing outdoors, reading books and traveling back to Canada where we enjoyed extended vacations with friends and relatives. Because they are growing up in rural Japan where they have few opportunities to use English, I set up an English play group for my children. When they turned five years old, they went to Japanese kindergarten part time and played with other English speakers on the days they weren't in school. From the age of three my daughters have been active members of a weekly English literacy group and were reading and writing at grade level when they began elementary school at age six. When my first daughter began Japanese elementary school (where there were no English language classes), I was still eager for her to continue her English literacy studies. I sought advice from the city board of education as well as the principal and vice principal at her school to find ways we could work together to achieve this end. After much deliberation I was informed, quite bluntly, that I could not count on support from the school during school hours and that I would have to carry on at home.

Although I am quite satisfied with the local elementary school which my daughters attend, I find the Japanese school day long and daily homework time-consuming. Factor in our family's English literacy studies and it makes for very busy days. Parents who take up the challenge of developing literacy in the Minority Language at home understand well that it requires a huge time commitment. Teaching at home requires an extreme amount of discipline and effort from both the parents and the child. Although family and friends encourage and support us, three years ago when both my daughters were in elementary school, juggling school life and home studies became more difficult. Struggling with the challenges and practicalities of developing Minority Language literacy myself, I wanted to know how other foreign families were coping with children learning to write English at home.

After reading extensively about bilingualism and biliteracy among the foreign community in Japan, I found little recent

research pertaining to Minority Language literacy, specifically, writing skills. I discovered that previous research primarily focused on two areas: developing and maintaining the child's spoken English and teaching the child to read in English (Smith, 1994; Noguchi, 1996; Yamamoto, 1995, 1996). There have been no studies about the challenge of teaching bicultural children to write in the Minority Language while they learn to write in Japanese at school. The lack of available data on this topic motivated me to conduct my own research, beginning with a survey.

Writing survey

Purpose

The purpose of this survey was to investigate how foreign parents in Japan were balancing the challenges of teaching their bicultural, elementary school aged children to write in the Minority Language and learning to write in Japanese at school.

Participants

The target respondents were foreign parents raising bicultural children who were attending Japanese elementary school. In order to maximize the number of respondents, the internet was used to collect data. A message was posted on five internet forums that had a combined membership of 7,500. They included *Married in Japan* (a support group for foreign women), *Education in Japan*, *Bilingual Japan*, *Association of Foreign Women in Japan*, and *English Teachers in Japan*. I was looking for foreign parents with young children who would be willing to answer the questionnaire. All respondents had to meet the following two criteria:

1. Be a foreign parent of a bicultural child attending Japanese elementary school.
2. Be residents of Japan.

Less than 1% of the combined membership responded; 16 fathers and 26 mothers of 86 children completed the survey, representing the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Singapore. The data was collected and analyzed over a period of six months between June and November 2010. Figures 1 and 2 describe the survey respondents.

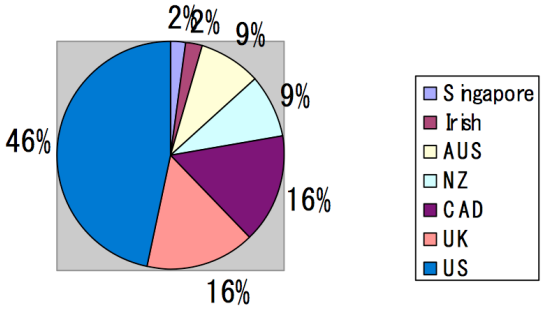

Figure 1. Nationality of survey respondents

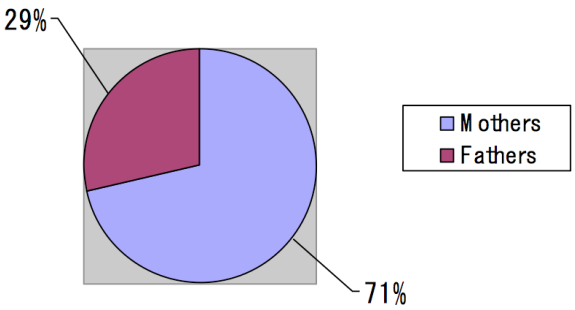

Figure 2. Gender of survey respondents

The survey instrument

The survey instrument was a questionnaire in English that included questions about teaching English writing skills to elementary school children at home. It contained two sections: the first involved gathering family background information (See Appendix 2).

In the second section, the mechanics involved in the task of teaching one's child to write in the Minority Language were the primary focus. The survey contained 11 questions in a multiple-choice format (See Appendix 2). Those parents who either quit teaching their child, or reported making the decision not to teach their child to write in the Minority Language were asked two further questions (See Appendix 3).

Results

In this section, the results are discussed in detail with a focus on the following four areas:

1. The age of the child when the parent began to teach.
2. The frequency of the writing lessons.
3. The materials used in the writing lessons.
4. The sources of support for the parent and child.

The first question asked why the parents made the decision to teach their child to write in the Minority Language at home. One hundred percent of the respondents (including those who ultimately chose to discontinue teaching their children the Minority Language) said they viewed the ability to write in English as an invaluable tool that they wanted their child to possess. Ninety-three percent said that they made the decision to teach the Minority Language before, or at the time of, the birth of their child. When the research was conducted in June 2010, all respondents had enrolled their children in Japanese public elementary schools that did not offer instruction in English writing. Those parents interested in having their child study at a Japanese school whilst learning to write in the Minority Language are left with no choice but to teach their child the Minority Language at home. Eighty-six percent of the parents reported that they started teaching their child English writing before they entered Japanese elementary school, between the ages of three and six (see Figure 3). The parents who began working with their children at three and four years of age said that instead of concentrating on writing specifically, they introduced English using books, games and other fun materials.

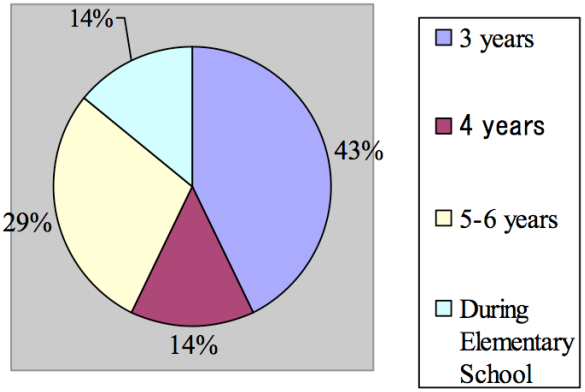

Figure 3. Age of the child at the start of Minority Language writing classes

The above results show that most of the parents made the decision early on in their child's life to make English literacy a family priority, thus making it a natural and important part of the family's lifestyle.

The second area of interest was the amount of time parents spent developing Minority Language writing skills with their child. Like most busy families with young children, time is a precious commodity. Yet with so many respondents wanting to keep their child writing in the Minority Language at grade level, it is not surprising that 60% of them worked with their child three or more days a week, with lessons lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. Although most lessons were taught in the evenings, all parents worked on English writing skills only after their child had completed their Japanese school homework. More than 60% worked with their child on weekdays either before or after the evening meal while the rest used time on the weekends (see Figures 4, 5 and 6).

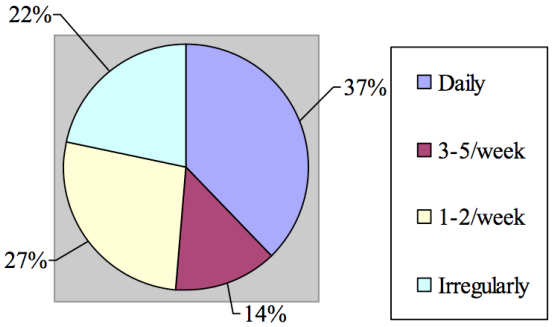

Figure 4. Frequency of Minority Writing lessons

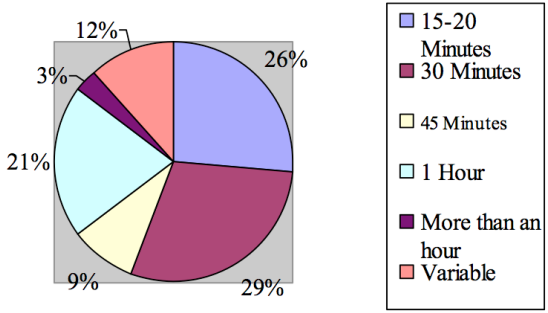

Figure 5. Length of Minority Language writing lessons

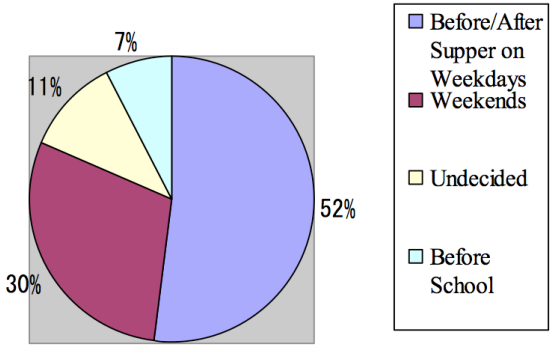

Figure 6. Schedule of Minority Language lessons

Some survey respondents included additional comments and several stressed the importance of making a consistent study schedule.

The next question of the survey concerned the teaching materials used to develop English literacy at home. As can be seen in Figure 7, parents used a variety of resources. Workbooks for native English speakers were the most common, followed closely by reading and journal writing. Most parents said the use of workbooks was three-fold. First, it assured the parents that the basic curriculum was being covered. Second, it saved the parents a lot of prep time. Third, after completing book the child felt a sense of accomplishment. Parents also used speed writing, the internet, letter writing and language games to enhance the learning experience.

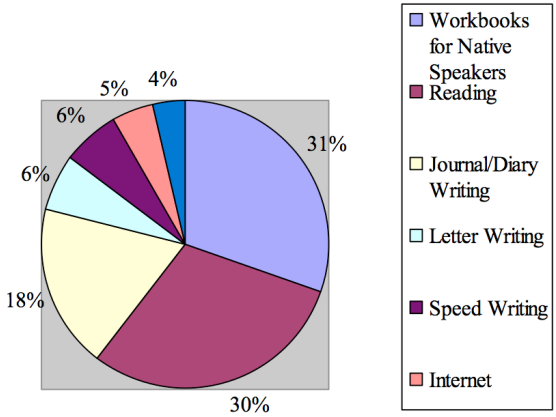

Figure 7. Teaching materials

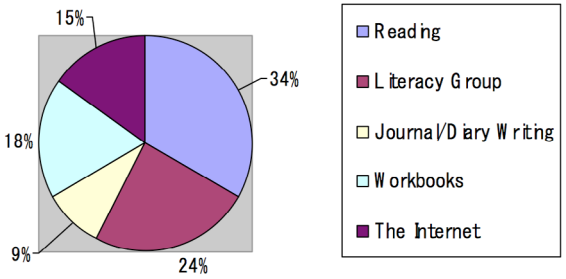

Figure 8. Children's preferred activities

When asked what their child enjoyed most about learning to write in their Minority Language, it was not surprising that reading topped the list (see Figure 8). Being a part of a community-based literacy group was also something the children enjoyed. Less than 40% of the parents reported that their children were studying with other bicultural children on a regular basis.

The last area of interest concerned sources of support for bicultural families pursuing Minority Language maintenance. The survey results show four main sources of support: the Japanese spouse, community-based literacy groups, extended family overseas and online groups.

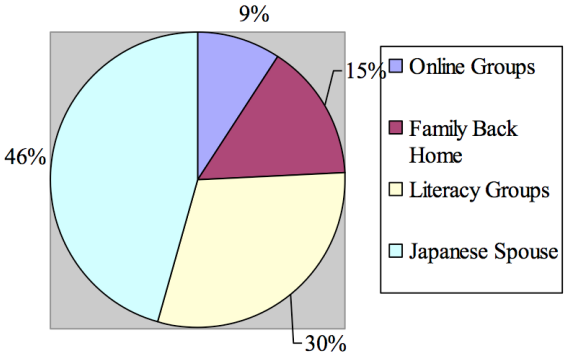

Figure 9. Sources of support

It is encouraging to see in Figure 9 that nearly half of the respondents were receiving support from their Japanese spouse, but surprising that more than 60% are working with their child alone, without support from a Minority Language group (see Figure 10).

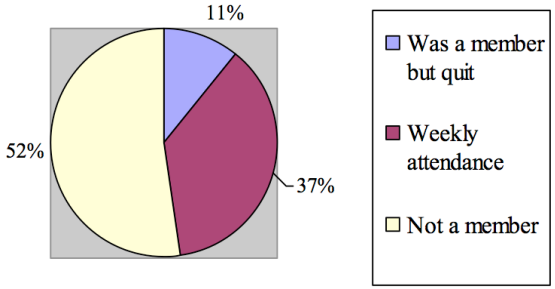

Figure 10. Membership of a Minority Language literacy group

As mentioned earlier, 25% of the respondents in this survey reported being unable to teach their child to write in the Minority Language. Reasons for this are explained in Figure 11. Lack of support was the primary cause. The Japanese spouse's support was reported as being what they needed most, as well as more support from their in-laws and family back home. Two other reasons listed were not having enough time in the week as well as their child's learning difficulties.

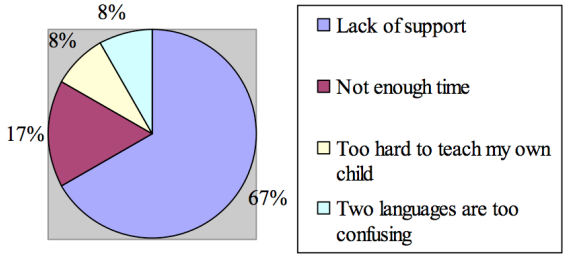

Figure 11. Reasons parents decide not to teach Minority Writing skills

Another factor that may have influenced the inability to teach the Minority Language was the gender of the child. Eighty percent of the first-born children that were not taught the Minority Language were male. At the time of the child's birth, these parents had hopes of teaching Minority Language writing skills, but for the above-mentioned reasons they were unable to and subsequently quit. This data indicates that the parents of first-born male children seem to have a more difficult time and need more help in teaching their child to write.

Recommendations

Having support is crucial in achieving a goal of learning to write in the Minority Language at home and perhaps the most compelling result of this project came in the form of comments from the survey respondents regarding the support received from literacy groups. Whether they are experiencing success in keeping the child writing at grade level or whether they made the decision to discontinue teaching their child, a lot of parents wrote in the comment section of the survey that a support network, or lack of one, was a determining factor in their results. It therefore came as a surprise that such a large number of survey respondents were not members of any literacy or language group.

Minority Language literacy groups

Most parents find that teaching their own child can be demanding and time consuming, and the parent and child alike require constant encouragement and motivation. All the families who participated in the survey had a child attending elementary school where he or she was the only English bilingual learning English writing at home. Many of the parents who reported having success in developing and maintaining Minority Language writing skills at home with their elementary school-age children stress the importance of setting up a support system that can work for the whole family. Community-based literacy groups were most often reported as a main source of support.

Setting up a group involves five steps: setting goals for the group, recruiting members, deciding on the structure of the group, setting guidelines for the group, and scheduling the lesson time, place and day. Although some families quit attending lessons with an organized group, the survey respondents who had experience with a literacy group reported that the advantages were several-fold and claimed that membership in these groups provided the motivation, reinforcement and validation that both parent and child are often in need of. Similar to homeschooling support groups, membership in literacy groups or language circles offers friendship for parents and children, and a place to socialize and be involved in extracurricular activities. In Japan where there is limited access to free English study materials, being a part of a group of people with similar needs, members have the opportunity to share, borrow and exchange educational resources. Perhaps more importantly, these groups offer the opportunity to seek advice and share experiences (Joye, 2005). In addition, these support groups can provide valuable help during personal and family emergencies.

Notebook Exchange

In order to motivate my daughters along the road to becoming skilled writers of English I am always in search of creative and authentic ways to help them along. After they had begun elementary school and were able to write in sentences, I wanted something that would be authentic in context and promote spontaneous writing. As the only two bicultural children in their school, there are times when my daughters wish they had school friends who could relate more to their bicultural family situation. Maybin (2000) found that letter writing can be a powerful channel for self expression and this is particularly so for people who are socially isolated. Letter writing can bring them into contact with others who understand and relate to their situation. Barksdale, Watson and Park (2007) studied letter exchanges among elementary school children and found that children follow the language patterns established by one another in their letters and that these exchanges are valuable in supporting and developing literacy.

Four years ago, with the support of another foreign parent in Japan who is also teaching Minority Language writing skills at home, we set up a notebook exchange for our two seven-year-

old daughters who had just begun elementary school. I chose to look for a pen pal in Japan instead of one who lived abroad for two reasons. A child living in Japan, who is from a similar background as my daughter, may have a greater understanding of our bicultural family situation and would be likely to be able to write about their school with less difficulty. Secondly, I felt that the parents would be fully supportive and that their involvement in the project would provide the necessary effort to keep the exchange alive and well since the children involved are still quite young.

Using one notebook and one clear file as an envelope that is recycled, the children take turns writing and illustrating letters and sending them back and forth. Last year, after watching her big sister write and receive letters, my second daughter who was in the second grade, began a notebook exchange with another Canadian child living in Japan. Figure 13 is the first letter written by each girl; the letter on the left is written by a seven-year-old and the letter on the right is by an eight-year-old.

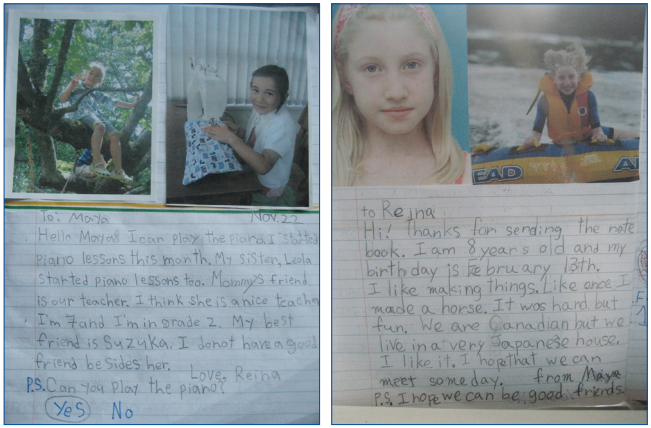

Figure 12. Letter 1 in a notebook exchange

Although there are no set rules about how often they write each other, I recommend that each family commit to completing two notebooks in order that at the end of the project (or when the child's interests wanes) each child will have a notebook full of letters and memories to keep. To maintain momentum, I suggest that the notebook not be kept with one child for more than a few weeks. For both my daughters, this activity has improved their writing skills, and helped build a good relationship between the children. I hope that, for the time being, they continue writing what will be a lifelong treasure.

Conclusions

In today's multilingual society, bicultural children deserve the opportunity to learn to write in both their languages. For many of the reasons mentioned in this paper, teaching a bicultural child writing skills in the Minority Language at home in Japan is an ambitious task. It requires sacrifice, discipline, a lot of time and considerable patience, but everyone--especially the child--benefits greatly. For those parents who share the goal of having their child learn to write in the Minority Language while learning to write Japanese at elementary school, this study shows that not only is it possible but it is being done, even if only in small numbers. Starting early before your child begins formal schooling, setting long-term goals, building a strong support network and working regularly using study materials for native speakers in a learning-conducive environment can produce great results.

The data collected in this survey was limited, and therefore further investigation of the subject is recommended. As children get older and become more involved in school activities, it becomes increasingly more challenging for them to find the time to study the Minority Language. I hope to stay focused and continue working with my children with the support of family and friends, and most importantly our literacy group. To gain further information, I plan to pursue this research by surveying

parents again when their children are in junior high school. I hope this paper will provide inspiration and guidance for those parents devoted to teaching their bicultural children to write in the Minority Language. For those with younger children who have not yet begun, this paper may offer some direction along the long and challenging journey to biliteracy.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of great efforts by many. To the anonymous families who answered my survey, to the mothers and fathers and children of our faithful community-based literacy group, to my daughters' pen pals A and M, I wish to thank you all. And finally, to my own children L and R, thank you for allowing me to be a part of this amazing journey along the road to literacy in your mother tongue.

Bio data

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Appendix 1

Minority Language Writing Survey Part 1

a. Gender of the foreign parent.
b. Number, gender and age of the child/ren.
c. Work status of the parent.
d. Country of origin of the parent.
e. Whether or not the family had plans to leave Japan while the child was in elementary school.

Appendix 2

Minority Language Writing Survey Part 2

1. Why did you make the decision to teach your child?
2. When did you make the decision to teach your child to write?
3. How old was your child when you began?
4. How often do you work with you child on writing skills?
5. How long are the writing 'lessons'?
6. What time of day do you teach your child?
7. Does your child study Minority Writing with other bicultural children and if so how often?
8. What teaching materials do you use?
9. What activity does your child enjoy most about the writing classes?
10. What sources of support do you have?
11. Is your child a member of a literacy group?

Appendix 3

Minority Language Writing Survey Part 3

1. Why did you make the decision not to teach your child Minority Language writing skills?
2. If you did not have enough support, who or what could have supported you more?