Developing a sense of bicultural membership in bilingual students: an Australian experience

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Abstract

A century after the formation of Federation, increasing numbers of young Australians are growing up bi- or multi-cultural. This is a reality that schools have to face and build upon, if we are aiming at developing a more harmonious nation.

The present paper argues that supporting balanced bicultural development of LOTE background children can lead to benefits for the individual as well as the society. Specifically, the paper examines a bilingual child’s writing of personal letters in both her tongues as a way of manifesting and constructing her bicultural membership.

The child’s personal correspondence was collected over a period of 4 years 3 months (age 4:9-9:0) and analysed using systemic functional grammar (Halliday 1994). It was found that letters in the child’s majority language (English) constructed and reaffirmed her membership in the local community, the society and the mainstream peer group. The letters written in the minority tongue (the language used in the child’s home) constructed the child’s sense of Australian citizenship as well as having strong emotional ties with relatives and solidarity with peers in her country of origin. Overall, engaging in letter writing in both her languages appeared to contribute to the bilingual child’s developing a sense of belonging to both the majority and minority cultures.

The paper discusses implications for the primary curriculum.
1. Introduction

A century after the formation of Federation, increasing numbers of young Australians are growing up bi- or multi-cultural. This is a reality that schools have to face and build upon, if we are aiming at developing a more harmonious nation. The days of the ‘white Australia’ are long passed now. As teachers, we feel that today’s and tomorrow’s nation is, and will continue to be developing as a multi-cultural entity. Indeed, at present in Australia one in four children speaks a language other than English. There are 100 or more imported languages and more than 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages (Lo Bianco 1987). Barratt-Pugh (1994, cit. in Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2001) and Rohl (1994, cit. in Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2001) comment on the richness and diversity of literacy practices in which such children are involved. However, they also emphasise that schools do not, on the whole, build on these practices. Whereas there have been several bilingual programs operating in some Australian schools (e.g., Fernandez 1992; Clyne 1991; Rado 1991), their number has been very limited and they tend to struggle under inadequate funding, monitoring and recognition (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl 2001: 665). For the vast majority of bilingual learners the mainstream schooling is the only formal educational environment. This makes the mainstream classroom a major, and often, the major, context for these children’s learning, including learning language. The relationship between our language and social identity appears to be a very intense one, whereby our identity is being shaped by our language practices, while simultaneously to a significant extent determining our participation in these practices. Language has been recognised to be “the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities” (Lippi-Green 1997: 5). Similarly, it has been argued that literacy is a social practice through which learners are apprenticed into group membership (Scribner & Cole 1981). Accepting that our identity is so predicated on our ability to use language and literacy, we have to view the classroom as an important space where bilingual students’ identities are constructed and re-constructed.

Research has shown that bilingual learners in the mainstream classrooms do best when they are allowed to maintain and further develop their home language and cultural identity while simultaneously learning about the dominant language and culture (Pierce 1995; Norton 1997, 1998). Bonny Norton (Pierce 1995; Norton 1997), in her studies of minorities "acculturation" in Canada, convincingly argues for the minority background children's mother tongue maintenance as an important means of shaping their bicultural 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 Australia, development of biculturality will mean children maintaining their ethnic identity alongside learning the English language and cultural ways of English-speaking Australians. In this paper I seek to demonstrate that acknowledging a bilingual child’s both languages, and providing meaningful contexts for furthering bilingual literacy skills promotes such a child’s developing a balanced bicultural identity. More specifically, this paper will consider a bilingual child’s letter writing as an important means of manifesting and constructing her biculturality.

In conceptualising bicultural identity, I will adopt Claire Kramsch’s understanding of identity as the dialogic construction of Self and Other through social semiotic systems.
such as language along social, historical and imagined axes of development (Kramsch 2001). Consequently, a person controlling two or more languages will be able to construct Self and Other in relation to more than one social, historical and imagined contexts, thus enacting their bi- or multi-cultural identity. In fact we can say that a person has a bilingual and bicultural identity when he or she identifies themselves with both cultures and are accepted as one of them by members of these cultural groups. A notion that bilinguals who have developed a reasonable control of their both languages have a potential to develop a bicultural identity was introduced by Ronald Taft (1981). Taft also argued that such bilingual speakers have a capacity to be inter-cultural mediators, which is especially important in a multi-cultural society, such as Australia.

Growing up bilingual and bicultural does not seem to be an easy thing for many LOTE background citizens in Australia. I informally interviewed a number of bilingual adults who grew up in homes where the language most commonly used for communication was not English. Many of these people spoke about their desire to ‘belong’ – to belong to a group, usually an ‘Aussie’ peer group, for young people, and to belong to an ethnic community. They also spoke about how they felt they never ‘really’ belonged. Miller (1997) reports similar findings after having interviewed high school migrant students in Queensland. Adolescents spoke of the difference the control of English made to their ability of being accepted into various social groups at school. Those students who, alongside maintaining their mother tongue, were successful in learning the language of the school, found their school years a much more satisfying experience. They usually felt valued members in their family and ethnic community, while simultaneously being a part of mainstream peer groups. This sense of ‘belonging’, feeling comfortable about one’s cultural identity, is very important for individuals’ wellbeing, as it is important for the wellbeing of a nation.

I got interested in this issue of cultural, and bicultural, identity as I embarked on a case study of a child developing bilingualism and bilingual literacy (Aidman 1999). I was looking at what she was able to do in her two languages, and how this was related to her life experiences of a bilingual child growing up in Australia. Very early I became aware of the fact that her language development and her sense of cultural membership were very closely intertwined. I came to this conclusion while observing the child’s interaction with members of the local Australian community, as well as with visitors from the child’s country of origin. One episode stands out particularly, as this was the case where the child was called upon to consciously re-think her cultural membership, and to demonstrate her awareness of her biculturality. It was a situation where she was enacting her bicultural identity in the context of immediate contact with representatives of the two cultures. At age of five, she was participating in a host program for Russian children surviving the Chernobyl accident. I volunteered as an interpreter, and she came along as my daughter and child mediator. On one occasion, she was part of a group of Australian and Russian children visiting a farm in rural Victoria. The farm owner organised for a hay fight setting up two groups, the Australians against the Russians. I declared my being neutral and settled to watch from a distance. Anna, the bilingual child, was the youngest in the group. She was however a gregarious child who managed to make friends rather quickly, and so was a welcome participant in all the activities, including this fight. Seeing her indecision as to which group to join, the Australian children started urging her to join theirs, “Come on Anna! You are with us! You are an Aussie, aren’t you?” At the same time, a
similar encouragement came from the Russian children who insisted, “But you are Russian, Anna, aren’t you! You should be with us!” There was a moment of thinking for Anna, after which she announced, “I am an Aussie. But I’m also a Russian. I will now be supporting the Russian kids, just because there are fewer of them!” (This was declared in English, and then repeated in Russian for the Russian-speaking participants.) Anna’s decision was accepted, and the five-year-old went ahead to have a good time, rolling in hay with everyone else.

So Anna used language to act out her bicultural identity and to reflect upon it. As I was monitoring the child’s development and overall wellbeing, I could see that her developing ‘belonging’ to both parental and the English-speaking cultures helped the child to settle in the new country, and in its academic contexts. This also helped her in developing friendships.

In this paper, I will analyse the child’s early letters written to a range of correspondents, in order to demonstrate how she was re-affirming her sense of belonging to the host culture as well as her parents’ culture. I will argue that letter writing as a cultural practice has a lot to offer in the area of developing LOTE background students’ bicultural identity. This is partly so due to the major social purpose of such language practice, which is negotiation of the interpersonal space between the writer and the correspondent. And it is here, in this interpersonal negotiation, that identities are constructed and re-constructed. I will finish up with discussing the implications of the analysis of the bilingual child’s letters for to the primary curriculum.

2. Method

The subject of this study is an English-Russian simultaneously bilingual child Anna who was born in Russia, and arrived to live in Australia from an early age of 3. All texts which she wrote in both her languages over the period of almost five years from pre-school (age 4:2) through Grade 3 in school (age 9:0) were collected and analysed using the Systemic Functional grammar (SFG) as proposed by Halliday (1994). Personal letters emerged among the child’s written products when she was 4 years 9 months old.

The focus in this paper will be on the child's developing choices in the Transitivity system, as the primary grammatical resource of language that relates to the topics the child chooses to write about in her letters. 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, examination of the child's choice of Processes (or verb types, in traditional grammar descriptions), Participants and Circumstances will enable us to see what experiences she chooses to talk about in her letters, and how the language choices she makes reveal and help construct the child's cultural identity.

The focus will also be on the choices related to the interpersonal dimension of language use, particularly on Mood and Modality choices. Such choices allow the writer to position herself vis-à-vis her addressees who are members of different cultural and linguistic groups.
3. Results and Discussion

3.1. English letters: learning to write as a member of the English-speaking culture

Letters written in English reveal the child's sense of belonging to and learning to participate in the English-speaking literate practices. Anna began writing letters in English before she started the mainstream schooling. Her first English letter was written at age 4 years 9 months, and was a Christmas greeting addressed to our neighbour’s grandchildren who Anna had become friendly with. Over the four-year period Anna wrote dozens and dozens of letters in English. Particularly numerous were greeting cards, such as birthday and Christmas cards, birthday/party invitations and party acceptance letters. She also wrote thank-you letters and invitations to play concerts for her own and visiting parents. Among the English letters there were also ones where the primary purpose was maintaining interpersonal relationships with peers, conveying a sense of affection and solidarity. To illustrate, I will reproduce four of the child's English letters written to different kinds of audience for 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, which is a conventional type of letter in the English-speaking culture. The letter is addressed to a colleague of the child’s father, and relates gratitude (politeness), also showing some solidarity with the addressee. Although very simple, this letter allows the child to position herself as a participant in the majority cultural practices.

The text below is a letter to a peer whose parents had gone to work in Fiji, taking the boy with them:

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

In this letter, it is significant that the child makes several interrogative choices in the Mood system, obviously showing interest in her friend's life, and attempting to make her text engaging for her English-speaking peer. Overall, 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.

Text EL3 is a letter to a neighbour independently initiated and completed by the child. This letter evolved in a ‘natural’ context where the child found the neighbour’s dogs roaming around local streets. She spent a fair amount of time ‘taming’ the dogs, and ended up bringing them over to the family backyard where she gave them food and water. After she was confident that the dogs were safe and reasonably comfortable, she started to think of how the neighbour would feel on his return home to find that both dogs had disappeared. This made Anna act quickly. She got a piece of paper and a pen, and a few minutes later she was delivering the letter to the neighbour’s mailbox. I called on him later that night and asked for permission to photocopy the letter written by Anna.

Text EL3 (age 9:0; grade 4)

(1) Dear Eric
(2) Do not be worried about your dogs
(3) They are at our place, after I found them beyond the boundary of the fence.
(4) We tried to open the gate to let them in but it was locked.
(5) And they were in a big trouble because they went on the road, went into neighbours’ gardens and got kicked out.
(6) 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)

In this letter, the child does not hesitate to give her adult neighbour instructions. These instructions are direct in sentence (2) Do not be worried about your dogs. Here she uses an Imperative Mood choice. Instructions are indirect in sentence (6) So your dogs are at our place, now waiting to get picked up. In this sentence Anna uses Indicative Declarative choices in the meaning of a command: “Come and pick up your dogs”.

Letter EL3 clearly shows the child's feelings of sympathy and solidarity with the neighbour, as well as some degree of authority, overall reflecting 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 a person in authority, voicing one’s concern about some matter. The teacher suggested that her three-graders could write to somebody who is in charge of TV program planning and complain about the choice of programs for children. The majority of the class (with the exception of two students) picked up the topic suggested by the teacher. Anna was one of the two children who preferred to make their own choice of the issue to be raised with the authorities. I knew that she had been concerned with some parents’ ineffectiveness, and almost ‘blindness’, when it came to encouraging their children to eat ‘healthy’; Anna had been talking to me about that at home. The letter she wrote in class (Text EL4) reflects the continuous urgency of the matter to her.
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 A.

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, the analysed English letters reveal the child constructing her identity as a member 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: constructing bicultural identity

The child's reliance on letters as a means of maintaining interpersonal contacts with Russian-speaking correspondents is culturally embedded. Letter writing has strong roots in the Russian literate culture into which the child was being "apprenticed", primarily by her mother and, to some extent, by her 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 who settled to live in 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 a positive affect towards, and a sense of kinship with, 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 5:9; grade Prep.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original:</th>
<th>Translation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>??????? ??????? M????</td>
<td>Dear granny Mila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>??? ????? ???????????</td>
<td>How are you feeling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>????????????? ?????????</td>
<td>Please prepare your warm clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>????????? ????????? ?????? ??????.</td>
<td>I love you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In many letters the child establishes links between herself and her correspondents, by reaffirming connections 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 RL2 (age 7:8; grade 2)

Original:

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

Translation:

 Dear granny
 ...  
 It is more convenient for us (if you come) in January or in December, for I have holidays at this time.

Text RL3 (age 8:6; grade 3)

Original:

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

Translation:

 Dear granny
 ...  
 Next time <<when I come to Russia>> I will by all means go to the dacha (country cottage) and help you there.

In Text RL3, 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 RL4 (5:6; grade Prep.)

Original:

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

Translation:

 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. The use of the Circumstance of location: place is very significant here, as it helps the child construct her sense of home.

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 5 (letter to a peer; age 7:3; grade 2)
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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, as in Text RL6:

Text RL 6 (letter to a peer; age 7:3; grade 2)

Original:  
Translation:  

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 7 (age 7:11, grade 3)

Original:  
Translation:  

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 RL7 reveals the child's awareness of her origin and her acceptance of the new place of residence. If anything, she sounds fairly matter-of-fact about her "trans-continental" move (her brief account of this move is underlined).

In letters to her peers (Texts RL 8-9), Anna becomes even more specific in geographically placing her residence for her overseas correspondents. This is constructed in the use of the Circumstances of location: place (underlined):

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

Original:  
Translation:  

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

Text RL 9 (age 8:1; grade 3)
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I live in Ballarat, not far from Melbourne, in the state of Victoria.

The above examples show the child’s awareness and acceptance of her being an Australian resident. More importantly however, personal letters come to reveal her feelings of security about and attachment to the area where she lives, even somewhat parochial attitudes:

Text RL10 (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 (Text RL 11) 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). It is significant that the child demonstrates knowledge of this tradition, and simultaneously awareness that her addressee might not necessarily be familiar with such an aspect of the local culture, and so Anna takes it upon her to justify her request:

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, and so in her Russian letters to the ‘Tooth Fairy’ Anna constructs herself as a Russian-speaker communicating with a Russian speaker, and hence the language choice. Such choice of language was obviously motivated by the language preference of the real life addressee who usually performed the role of the Tooth Fairy, Anna’s mother. However, Anna simultaneously positions herself as a participant in the local ways and traditions, as a child addressing the imagined Tooth Fairy, and hence her request for some cash.

One can feel the pride, involvement and belonging with which the child reports on 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 Text RL13 will demonstrate. The text is an excerpt from a letter to the earlier mentioned adult correspondent, a Russian singer (see Text RL 7):

Text RL13 (8:8; grade 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original:</th>
<th>Translation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>????????????? ????????? ?? ??????? ???????, ?????? ????????? ??????????????? ?????????? ??????? ?????? ?? ????????? ??????????? ?????? ??? ??????? ? ? ??????????? ??????????? ?????? ?? ??????? ??????????? ?? ??????? ??????????? ?????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? ??????????? .</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the earlier letters, the child's dealing in more abstract matters has led to her using more sophisticated grammatical choices. There are in fact a number of abstract notions being related in the above excerpt:

?? ????? (elections), ??????????????? ??????????? (independent state), ????????? [?? ????? ? ????? ??????????? ?? ???????? ?? ????????]] (monarchy [(headed by the English Queen)]), ??????????? (independence).

The use of participants realised in complex nominal groups (noun phrases) containing abstract nouns reveals the child’s interest in fairly serious matters of the Australian political system. She also made a choice to raise this issue with an adult addressee, and not with her children correspondents, as she most likely considered the issue to belong to the realm of the adult world concerns. Being an eight-year-old child herself, she nonetheless clearly outlined her position, simultaneously providing a reason for her point of view. In this case, Anna voiced a strong opinion, which was expressed using her family language. By doing this, she confidently positioned herself as a person who has a say about matters important for Australia.

As the above analysis of the child's letters has revealed, she kept in touch not only with older family members and friends, but with children as well. In letters to peers she often wrote about her own experiences, while also 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 distanced cousin (Text RL 14):

Text RL14 (age 8:1; grade 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original:</th>
<th>Translation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>?????? ????? ?????????</td>
<td>How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>???????? ??????? ?? ?? ?? ? ?????? How many girls are there in your class?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>???????? ???????????</td>
<td>What program do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?????????</td>
<td>What subjects do you study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?????????</td>
<td>What sport do you play?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interrogative choices in the Mood system are significant as they allow Anna to show interest in her cousin's life and to construct her text as part of an on-going interaction with a peer, thus keeping him engaged while reading the letter.
Such correspondence of Anna’s reflects 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, such written communication with her peers served to reaffirm the child's view of herself as a young person of a Russian-speaking background. In her letters to Russian-speaking children she continuously reconstructs herself as an active and equal participant in the peer culture mediated by the Russian language.

Overall, the analysis of the child’s letter writing in her minority tongue reveals her constructing and enacting a bicultural identity. The child highlights her strong emotional links with the culture of her addressees, while simultaneously demonstrating awareness of her more recent, Australian, existence. Anna’s letters show that the child recognises, accepts and appreciates these new aspects of her life experiences.

4. Conclusion and implications for primary curriculum

Analysis of a young child’s personal letters is an effective way to learn about his or her developing control of the written mode of language. John Collerson (1983) was one of the first linguists to examine changes in the child’s control of writing within this mode. He described the expanding range of purposes for letter writing as well as changes within syntax in his daughter Julia’s letters when she was a primary aged child (age 5 to 10 years). Robinson and her colleagues (Robinson et al., 1992) reported on employing letter writing mode in the classroom as a method of encouraging young children’s engagement with the written mode, by making it more personally meaningful. However, although in their data there were texts written by bilingual children, bilingualism and possible biculturality of these students were beyond the scope of that research. So, whereas letter writing as a means of developing children’s literacy skills has been acknowledged (Collerson, 1983; Robinson et al., 1992), the significance of this mode of language interaction as a social practice has not really been explored, and has not been accounted for within the primary curriculum.

My analysis of the bilingual child’s letters over the period of 4 years and two months supports many of the earlier findings about the patterns of language development established for monolingual English writing. Thus, writing personal letters in both her tongues stimulated Anna’s developing control over the written mode in the two languages, which helped her succeed academically. This also furthered her positive attitudes towards her bilingualism. No less important is the finding that for the child growing up bilingual, communication via letter writing proved to be a significant means of constructing and enacting her developing biculturality. The analysis of the child’s personal letters has revealed negotiation of her bicultural identity. The fact that it was usually ‘natural’, or real, life contexts that gave rise to her letters suggests relevance of this cultural practice for the young child.

To conclude, letter writing, whether in pen and paper, or in its more ‘modern’ e-mail type, seems to be an important means for children’s keeping in touch with people in their social environment. This allows young people to express who they are, to re-
affirm their sense of ‘belonging’, to exercise their opinion and power as citizens of their country. In this sense, encouraging children to keep personal contacts via letter writing appears to be useful for both bilingual and monolingual learners. The significance of participating in this kind of written interaction is heightened for bilingual learners, as letter writing opens up an avenue for their further bilingual development through growing command of the written mode of their two languages. Besides, letter writing allows bilingual learners to construct and negotiate their bicultural identities.

Letter writing is a mode of language use which is, or has a potential of being, an authentic part of most children’s life experiences. It is also very practicable in terms of facility of its implementation in the classroom teaching. This written mode can be used in the work on language, as well as in the area of SOSE. There may be identified other areas of curriculum where the mode of letter writing will function to re-affirm this form of communication as a social practice. Many of us, teachers, have perhaps at some stage used this type of writing in the primary curriculum, as this was on one occasion organised by Anna’s grade 3 teacher (refer to Text LE3 in the above discussion). However, it seems that the potential of this language mode still has to be explored for what it can offer in terms of bilingual education, as an important means of promoting a sense of bicultural membership in our bilingual students.

References


