

Japanese-English Bilingual Children's Literacy Development in Weekend Schools in Japan

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Some Japanese-English bilingual children who attend Japanese public schools learn to read and write in English in weekend schools. This study evaluates the English literacy levels of 31 Japanese-English bilingual children (ages nine to 15) who attend English weekend school in Tokyo or Yokohama. Their English writing ability was measured using a U.S. standardized writing test. Most participants' overall writing ability was *Average*. The children performed better in "spontaneous" writing (e.g., story composition) than in "contrived" writing (e.g., conventions like spelling). Their writing strengths and weaknesses reflect their regular Japanese and weekend school education and the support they receive from their parents at home. This study has implications for the weekend school model and its importance in supporting minority language literacy in Japan.

日本には、週末補習校で英語の読み書きを学ぶ日英バイリンガルの子どもたちがいる。本研究では、東京または横浜の週末補習校に通う31名の日英バイリンガルの子ども（9歳～15歳）の英語リテラシーを検証した。アメリカの標準化されたテストを使用し、調査協力者の英語のライティング能力を測定した結果、ほとんどの子どもの英語によるライティング能力は平均に達していることが明らかになった。また、子どもたちは、スペリングなどの制限が与えられた問題より、自発的にストーリーを作成する問題において、良い成績を収めた。彼らの英語によるライティング能力は、日本の学校教育及び週末補習校での教育と保護者からのサポートによる影響を受けていると考えられる。本研究の結果は、日本において、英語を含めた少数言語のリテラシーを促進する週末補習校の役割を示すものである。

Parents having different language and cultural backgrounds are often motivated to raise bilingual children. They soon discover that early bilingual exposure does not guarantee active bilingualism (see De Houwer, 2020, for a review). Any initial success with simultaneous bilingual children can be lost when children start formal schooling, as most bilingual families send their children to monolingual majority language schools (e.g., 92% of 98 families in Barron-Hauwaert, 2004) rather than enrolling them in the more expensive option of bilingual education, where biliteracy can be guaranteed through schooling (Slavkov, 2017). While the importance of biliteracy is indisputable, few studies investigate how simultaneous bilingual children acquire biliteracy (see Bialystok, 2007, for a review). Bialystok (2007) has referred to children exposed to two languages from birth as "linguistically privileged" because they have the necessary prerequisites to establish literacy in their languages, e.g., when both parents start reading to them in their respective languages from infancy.

In Japan, the dominance of the Japanese language in all aspects of life in Japanese society makes bilingual parenting a formidable challenge for minority language parents. However, Yamamoto (2008) has found that Japanese-English bilingualism may be more attainable than bilingualism involving other minority languages (henceforth referred to as “non-societal languages”). Although foreign residents from English-speaking countries make up a minuscule proportion of the population in census data (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2022), English is highly valued for academic and career purposes. Only since 2020 has English been offered from Grade 5 (Grade 7 previously) as a formal subject in Japanese elementary schools, so these English as a Foreign Language lessons do not foster a high level of English literacy. Therefore, reading and writing skills for bilingual children who speak English regularly at home from birth can be learned only informally, from their English-speaking parents and from attending weekend school for level-appropriate instruction.

Weekend schools (the term we prefer) are also known as “complementary,” “heritage,” “ethnic,” “supplementary,” or “Saturday” schools (Nordstrom, 2020). These voluntary establishments help children acquire oral and literacy skills in the non-societal language when such education is lacking in mainstream schools. Weekend schools cater to simultaneous as well as sequential bilingual children like returnees. While focusing on reading and writing, they may also include instruction about the minority culture through language, crafts, music, or dance (Kenner, 2004; Li & Wu, 2010) and serve as a community space for families (Ganassin, 2020). These activities facilitate the children’s language and identity development (Prokopiou & Cline, 2010). Barradas (2004) found that children who attend weekend school do better at their regular school. In the UK, minority children who attend weekend-schools have a more positive attitude towards education than those who do not attend—they are more attentive, well-behaved, and motivated to learn (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2010). While the benefits of weekend school attendance are clear, little is known about the actual literacy level attained from such attendance, which the current study hopes to address.

Minority Language Learning and Biliteracy

Most biliteracy studies focus on reading rather than writing, on pre-school and early elementary school children rather than late elementary and middle school children, and on sequential rather than simultaneous bilinguals (see Rothou & Tsimpli, 2020, for a review of such studies). Taura and Taura (2012, p. 477) point out that Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA or simultaneous bilingual) children are generally “exposed to only one (socially dominant and school medium) language” when they start school, and there is little research on the development of their non-societal language in middle school and beyond. Their 14-year longitudinal case study of biliteracy development is indeed a rare investigation. While their Japanese-English BFLA subject was mostly schooled in Japan from Grades 1 to 12, she performed at almost age-appropriate levels in oral narrative tasks and standardized oral and written tests in English. The turning point in her narrative development occurred at age 11. The factors posited was an eight-month stay in Australia followed by enrollment in a bilingual Japanese-English high school in Japan, which caused Taura and Taura (2012, p. 501) to wonder “whether intensive exposure at a certain age, on top of constant exposure since birth, is essential to boost a bilingual child’s nondominant language to the monolingual level.” Without such “essential” intensive exposure, it has been found that literacy support at home coupled with weekend school attendance is vital for non-societal language development (see Mattheoudakis et al., 2020, for a review). Whether family and community factors alone, rather than studying abroad or bilingual

education (as in the case of Taura & Taura, 2012), can boost language and literacy levels to the “monolingual level” remains unknown.

Most studies have not conducted standardized tests to ascertain the minority language proficiency levels of children attending weekend school but have based their conclusions on parental perceptions in questionnaire surveys or interviews, or having children perform simple vocabulary or comprehension tasks. For example, Mattheoudakis et al. (2020) state that Albanian children in Greece who take Albanian language classes had higher literacy skills in Albanian than those who did not. Their conclusion is based on parental assessments of their children's competence in each of their two languages.

Literacy Development in a Non-societal Language in Japan

Most Japanese children usually learn to read and write in a foreign language, which is likely English, from age eight or older in elementary school. However, two groups of children may also acquire literacy in a non-societal home language (including English) if they receive the necessary instruction: (1) non-Japanese migrant children, and (2) simultaneous bilingual and bicultural children from families where one parent is Japanese and the other non-Japanese. Unfortunately, mainstream schools do not usually teach the minority language as Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology offers no official policy regarding bilingual education for such children (Majima & Sakurai, 2021). Some schools may make use of the non-societal language to help students learn academic subjects and promote inclusivity, but it is typically not taught on its own as a language (Nishikawa, 2019). Exceptions, however, exist in regions with long-established minority communities. Notably, more than 100 public schools in Osaka provide after-school *minzoku gakekyuu* or “ethnic classes” to teach Korean language and culture to children of Korean descent (Kim, 2006). Some Osaka schools also offer Mandarin or Vietnamese lessons to Chinese or Vietnamese students (see Nishikawa, 2019, for a review).

Minority language education is usually instead the initiative of local government bodies and non-profit organizations (Takahashi, 2015). They set up *bogo kyōshitsu* (mother-tongue classes) in areas with many foreign residents, e.g., there are around 40 mother-tongue classes in Osaka teaching languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Portuguese (Sakurai, 2019). Mother-tongue classes are usually run by volunteers in borrowed spaces, e.g., schools (Takahashi, 2015). How mother-tongue classes are run depends on educators' and parents' expectations and children's proficiency levels. However, the lack of teacher training and teaching resources, dependency on volunteers, limited instruction time, children's mixed-abilities and lack of motivation to learn the language hamper their effectiveness (Saito, 2005; Takahashi, 2015).

Another type of grassroots minority language education in Japan is what we term the weekend school. Labeling these weekend schools as mother-tongue classes would be inappropriate because attendees are usually simultaneous bilingual children, i.e., they have two mother tongues. Thus far, those reported in the research teach English (although we are aware that parent-run weekend schools in other languages also exist). While many of the children who attend English weekend schools come from intermarriage families where one parent is from an English-speaking country, some children do have parents of other nationalities (e.g., Malaysian, or even Japanese) who speak English to them. These weekend schools are typically established and run by non-Japanese parents, unlike mother-tongue classes, which are usually managed by Japanese volunteer members of non-profit organizations. Pauly and Yamane (1999) explain the English weekend school model, which involves parents' taking turns to teach or hiring a teacher for lessons taught at one of the

families' homes or at an external venue. Such English weekend schools focus on developing the literacy of children who are using the non-societal language actively at home. They contrast with mother-tongue classes that help maintain the L1 oral fluency of migrant children who may otherwise experience language attrition (Takahashi, 2015). Nakamura (2019) is an ethnographic study of eight families whose Japanese-English bilingual children attend a weekend school in Tokyo. This school is also one of the two sites for the current study. In Nakamura (2019), the parents of the Tokyo weekend school believed that a high level of English literacy would help their children get into better schools, including high schools or colleges abroad. They also have a strong *impact belief* (De Houwer, 1999), i.e., a strong conviction that they could develop their children's English literacy with support from their spouses, other parents, and the weekend school. The parents' language ideology (that English literacy will lead to better education and career prospects) and strong impact belief motivated them to read with their children and supervise weekend school homework.

Although these English-speaking parents are highly invested in their children's weekend school learning, foreign parents speaking other minority languages in Japan are less enthusiastic about their children's learning in mother tongue classes (Saito, 2005). Foreign children from non-English-speaking families usually have minimal or no home language literacy skills, particularly if they arrived in Japan at a young age and did not attend school in their home country (Bussinguer & Tanaka, 2010; Sakurai, 2013). They also struggle to learn Japanese as an L2. However, those with L1 literacy skills tend to have a higher level of Japanese reading abilities (Majima & Sakurai, 2019), underscoring the importance of fostering non-societal language literacy for bilingual and biliteracy development.

The Present Study

Simultaneous bilingual and bicultural children who attend parent-run weekend schools in Japan are arguably better-positioned to acquire a high level of biliteracy than sequential bilingual children. Unfortunately, biliteracy research in Japan thus far has predominantly focused on sequential and not simultaneous bilingual children (see Majima, 2019, for a review). As far as we are aware, there is also no study measuring the non-societal language literacy skills of bilingual children attending either weekend schools or mother-tongue classes. As a first step in this research on a grassroots minority language literacy initiative in Japan, this paper establishes the English literacy level of children who attend English weekend school either in Tokyo or in Yokohama. In future investigations, we will use survey and interview data from parents and children to analyze the language and literacy support received in the home. Since children enrolled in weekend school undoubtedly have parents who are enthusiastic about biliteracy development, home support may prove to play an integral role, with weekend school activities, in supporting children's English literacy development. Although an earlier study of parents with children in the Tokyo weekend school (Nakamura, 2019) already revealed that the parents' pro-English language ideology and strong impact belief motivated home literacy practices, Nakamura's study did not determine the children's level of English literacy. The current study addresses this gap by measuring English writing skills. Having confirmed, through their school grades, that our participants all have grade-level Japanese abilities, we do not investigate their Japanese literacy. We focus on their English literacy because they receive level-appropriate instruction only in weekend school and not from regular school, as elementary school lessons are geared towards the needs of monolingual Japanese children rather than bilingual participants with English ability.

We assess the children's writing because writing has hardly been examined in previous biliteracy research, which has focused mainly on reading. Skilled writing is a demanding task that comes later in the language learning process (Shanahan, 2006). It requires more explicit and structured instruction than reading (e.g., spelling tests versus bedtime stories). Japanese-English biliteracy is particularly challenging because English orthography differs from Japanese orthography. The latter has the syllabic *katakana* and *hiragana* and the logographic *kanji* characters, which can be written horizontally or vertically. Given that writing is an advanced skill, we study developing writers ages nine and above who attend weekend school.

The questions we ask in this initial investigation are:

1. What is the range in English writing proficiency of Japanese-English bilingual children attending parent-run English weekend schools?
2. What are their English writing strengths and weaknesses?

Methodology

The Weekend Schools

To answer our two research questions, we recruited participants from two English weekend schools in Tokyo and Yokohama. Both schools, established by parents, have been running out of community centers for more than 10 years and have a strong focus on building English literacy. Approximately 40 children are enrolled in four or five classes of different levels in each school. The children have one hour of instruction every Saturday, with the older children in Tokyo receiving 1.5 hours in the higher-level classes. Both schools have three terms, with 34 weeks a year in Tokyo and 36 in Yokohama. The annual class time is either 34 or 36 hours (with 51 hours for older children in Tokyo). However, hardly any child attends all the classes as they usually have regular school on Saturdays once a month, so most children have only about 30 hours of class time annually.

Native English-speaking teachers with teaching certification (e.g., the American Board) and experience teaching at international or Japanese schools teach at both schools. Literacy activities in class include reading, word games, and discussion. Class writing tasks include quizzes and exercises to master spelling, punctuation, and grammar in English. Children in higher-level classes also participate in extended writing projects by planning, writing, and rewriting an essay over the course of a term. U.S. language arts materials are used for these purposes. The teachers also give homework, e.g., daily reading and writing worksheets. Overall, the classes focus on discussions of written texts with homework to encourage children to continue reading and writing outside of class.

Participants

Background information on the families was collected using questionnaires and interviews to ascertain the home, weekend school, and child variables that contribute to the children's English literacy. Table 1 lists 31 children (16 males and 15 females) aged nine to 15, with those aged nine, ten, and 12 making up the largest groups. Three-letter pseudonyms have been assigned for each child. Twenty-three children have one Japanese-speaking parent from Japan (JPN) and one English-speaking parent from either the US, UK, Australia (AUS), or Canada (CAN). Three have one Japanese-speaking and one highly fluent non-native English-speaking parent from Indonesia (IND), Thailand (THA) or Malaysia (MYS). Thus, 26 children are from bilingual-bicultural families. Of the remaining five children, four have two Japanese parents, whereas one has two parents from Taiwan (TWN) who speak Mandarin and English. In all the families, at least one parent is a native or near-native English speaker due to formal education in that language. All the children

Table 1*Background of Children and Their Parents (grouped according to age)*

	Child	Sex	Age*	Parents' CoO**	Child	Sex	Age	Parents' CoO**	
1	RIM	M	9;2.23	Both JPN	16	HAK	F	11;0.29	Both JPN
2	EMS	F	9;5.8	JPN & US	17	SHO	M	11;0.5	JPN & THA
3	LET	M	9;6.2	JPN & US	18	MOH	M	11;1.23	JPN & CAN
4	KOO	F	9;6.3	JPN & US	19	MAS	F	11;4.9	JPN & US
5	TAK	M	9;6.5	JPN & US	20	AMS	F	11;6.21	JPN & UK
6	JOG	M	9;8.13	JPN & US	21	ARS	F	12;0.1	JPN & US
7	LUH	M	9;9.13	JPN & AUS	22	ALN	M	12;10.11	JPN & CAN
8	LUM	M	9;9.29	JPN & AUS	23	LIS	F	12;10.12	JPN & US
9	YUC	F	9;10.29	Both TWN	24	ISN	M	12;3.17	JPN & MYS
10	JAS	M	10;11.8	JPN & US	25	KYM	F	12;6.3	JPN & AUS
11	SAK	F	10;2.21	JPN & US	26	TYA	M	12;7.19	JPN & UK
12	KAN	F	10;3.1	JPN & IND	27	AYO	F	12;8.26	JPN & US
13	SHS	M	10;5.2	JPN & US	28	EMM	F	13;5.8	Both JPN
14	ERS	F	10;5.30	JPN & US	29	CAS	M	14;3.2	JPN & UK
15	JUN	F	10;8.7	JPN & CAN	30	YOD	M	14;9.17	JPN & US
					31	HIM	M	15;8.16	Both JPN

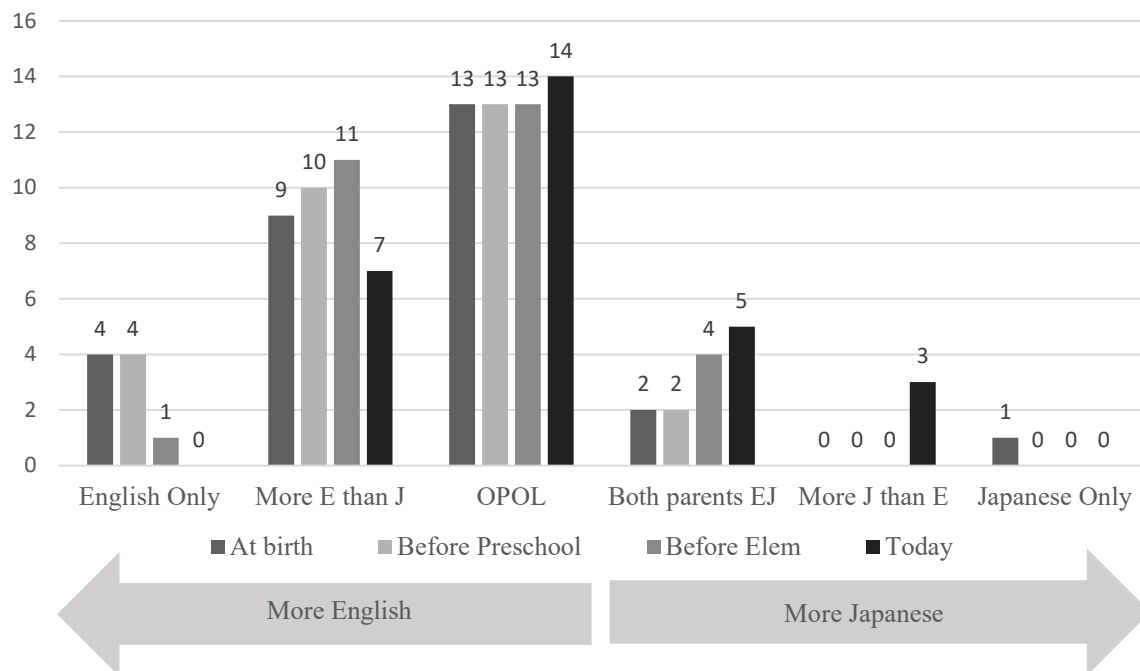
Notes. * Age is expressed as year;month.day on date of testing ** Country of Origin

were born in Japan except for LET and YUC (3 and 9, respectively, in Table 1). LET was born in the US and lived there until age six. He attended Japanese weekend school in the US and started learning to read and write Japanese there. YUC arrived in Japan from Taiwan at 10 months of age. All but four have lived only in Japan (LET, YUC, SAK and HAK lived abroad in early childhood). However, all the children started Grade 1 in Japan. They attend Japanese elementary and junior high schools that do not provide instruction appropriate to their level of English ability.

Figure 1 provides insight on how the language input has changed for 29 children from 25 families from birth to the present day. Two children were excluded: SHO (17 in Table 1) did not hear any English directly but has been exposed to English indirectly from birth from his parents who use it to each other (Slavkov, 2017, has found that a minority language spoken between parents can support children's multilingualism); YUC did not

Figure 1

Children's Language Exposure History (with vertical axis indicating the number of children)



hear any Japanese, but her parents consistently spoke Mandarin and English to her from birth until the present day. Thus, Figure 1 shows the language input history of the 29 children who have been exposed to Japanese and English from infancy until now (note that SHO and YUC are also simultaneous bilinguals, just not in Japanese and English). The arrows indicate a continuum starting in the center of Figure 1 with families where one parent spoke English while the other spoke Japanese (OPOL) or both parents used English with Japanese (Both parents EJ). The arrow to the left indicates more English and to the right, more Japanese exposure. Only HAK had Japanese parents (16) who spoke Japanese to her at birth, as the family lived in the US, where she had external exposure to English. Upon returning to Japan, they provided more English than Japanese before preschool and switched to OPOL before elementary school. Today, they and the parents of the siblings, EMM (28) and HIM (31), are the two Japanese families providing “More J than E” with one parent using EJ and the other, Japanese. Although RIM’s (1) parents are also both Japanese, they consistently followed the OPOL approach from birth until today. All four sets of parents who started with “English only” are now providing “More E than J” where one parent uses only English, while the other uses both languages. Only four children who heard “More E than J” remained in the same pattern until today, with others who started with “More E than J” switching to OPOL or “Both parents EJ.” OPOL was consistently followed from birth until the present by the parents of 11 children. In sum, except for two families (of HAK and the siblings, EMM and HIM), the rest are providing as much English as possible through “More E than J,” OPOL, and “Both parents EJ.”

Assessment Tool

We used the Test of Written Language or TOWL (4th Ed.), a standardized test designed for children from ages nine to 17, to assess our bilingual children’s English writing ability. According to Hammill and Larsen (2009), the test is based on a large normative sample of 2,205 children from 17 states in the US. We chose the TOWL because it is a

comprehensive tool that can determine the children's particular strengths and weaknesses across various aspects of English writing. It can also document writing progress, which is what we will be doing as part of our larger, longitudinal study of Japanese-English bilingual-biliterate children in Japan. Although the TOWL is used in the US to measure the writing proficiency of children aged nine to 17, it has features which allow it to be used to assess children of different age groups in non-U.S. contexts. Its sub-tests typically start from easy items and progress to more difficult ones. Testing stops once a child is unable to proceed to more difficult items. This feature of the test allows us to work with children of various writing proficiencies, including younger children with less-developed writing skills.

The TOWL generates age-based composite index scores that are useful for evaluating our small group of participants of different ages. In using the normative scores with seven descriptive terms ranging from *Very Poor* to *Very Superior*, our participants' writing performance is inevitably benchmarked against same-aged U.S. children (e.g., the descriptive term *Average* indicates that a participant is performing in this range as established for a same-age U.S. child). We emphasize that these descriptions of writing ability that we provide in the Results section are solely for evaluative purposes, despite the reference to U.S. norms. The scores are used to explain our bilingual participants' level of writing in an objective manner. Specifically, the age-based scores help us to compare our 31 participants from seven age groups (see Table 1) with each other. They also help us to understand the different abilities among our participants. As we informed the parents before the assessment, children attending English weekend schools in Japan are not expected to possess the same level of literacy as children receiving full-time education in the US. Therefore, in the absence of an instrument designed specifically for Japanese-English bilingual children, we adopt the TOWL only for the purpose of determining the range of their writing abilities, for in-group comparisons, and for longitudinal monitoring of each child in future analyses.

The TOWL examines two writing formats: "contrived" or the conventional, linguistic, and cognitive aspects of expressive writing and "spontaneous" story writing. The contrived writing format tests discrete aspects of written discourse such as vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, and sentence combining (see Table 2 for examples). The subtests are carefully controlled and reflect the language arts curricula at U.S. schools. High scorers in contrived writing "have evidently benefited greatly from their school experience; they understand the rules of test-taking; and they probably know the fundamental skills of good writing" (Hammill & Larsen, 2009, p. 50). Low performers, on the other hand, have not grasped the basic elements of the English writing system. In the spontaneous writing format, the child writes a story in response to a stimulus picture. The task tests children's use of contextual conventions and story composition. Children who do well have applied their good writing skills to create a contextually meaningful story. Low scores, however, show a lack of skills or motivation to write a meaningful text spontaneously and a lack of practice in using writing as a communication medium.

Each child took the 90-minute assessment individually with one of the researchers. The children took the test before or after their Saturday lessons at the community center where their weekend school was hosted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we switched to online testing for nine children. Each test was graded separately by the researchers who later discussed and agreed on the final scores for each child. Inter-rater discourse is an important component of our study for ensuring reliable assessment results (as also advocated by Matthews, 2021). We then converted the scores for all seven subtests shown in Table 2 into composite index scores to obtain seven descriptive terms ranging from *Very Poor* to *Very Superior*.

Table 2
Writing Tasks in TOWL-4

Contrived writing	Details
1. Vocabulary	The student writes a sentence with a stimulus word. For <i>ran</i> , the student can write, " <i>I ran up the hill.</i> "
2. Spelling	The student writes sentences from dictation, using appropriate spelling rules.
3. Punctuation	The student writes sentences from dictation, using appropriate punctuation and capitalization rules.
4. Logical Sentences	The student edits an illogical sentence to make better sense. " <i>John blinked his nose</i> " is changed to " <i>John blinked his eye.</i> "
5. Sentence Combining	The student integrates the meaning of several short sentences into one grammatically correct written sentence. " <i>John drives fast</i> " is combined with " <i>John has a red car,</i> " making " <i>John drives his red car fast.</i> "
Spontaneous writing	Details
6. Contextual Conventions	The student writes a story in response to a stimulus picture. Points are earned for satisfying specific requirements relative to orthographic (e.g., punctuation, spelling) and grammatical conventions (e.g., sentence construction, noun-verb agreement).
7. Story Composition	The student's story is evaluated relative to the quality of its composition (e.g., vocabulary, plot, prose, development of characters, and interest to the reader).

Results

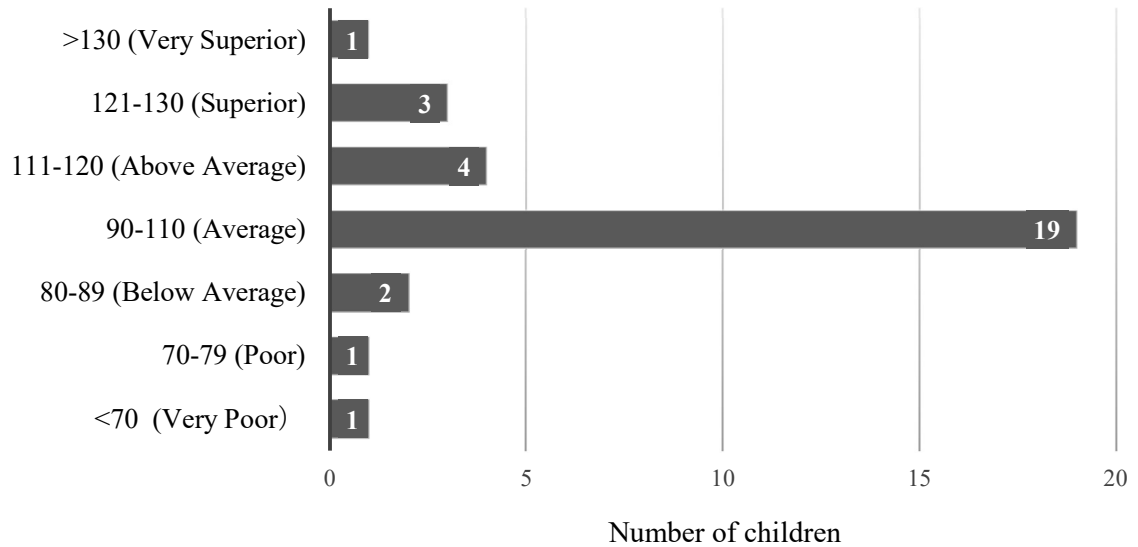
Overall Writing Ability

To determine the participants' general writing performance, we use age-based composite index scores. The overall writing composite index score is a good indication of general writing ability as it is based on all seven TOWL subtests. The test creators (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) consider it to be the most widely used, reliable, and valid score. Our results show that most of the children performed well on the TOWL, with a mean score of 102

($SD = 14.6$), which is slightly above the test mean of 100 ($SD = 15$). Figure 2 summarizes the 31 participants' composite index scores for overall writing and shows that 19, or 61.3%, of the children achieved an overall writing composite index score between 90 and 110, in the *Average* range. A further eight (25.8%) attained scores of 111 or more, ranging from *Above Average* to *Very Superior*. Such high scores indicate not only a command of a wide range of writing skills but also good reading ability (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

Figure 2

TOWL Overall Writing Performance (composite index scores)



Contrived Writing and Spontaneous Writing Ability

In terms of TOWL's two main formats, Figure 3 shows that most children performed better in the spontaneous than in the contrived writing format. While six children had composite index scores in the *Average* range for spontaneous writing (versus 13 for contrived writing), 23 children's spontaneous writing were in the higher score ranges, i.e., *Above Average* for eight of them, *Superior* for 12 and *Very Superior* for three. More children performed in the lower score ranges for contrived writing, i.e., below a score of 90. Eleven children had *Below Average*, *Poor* or *Very Poor* contrived writing scores, but only two children performed in these ranges for spontaneous writing.

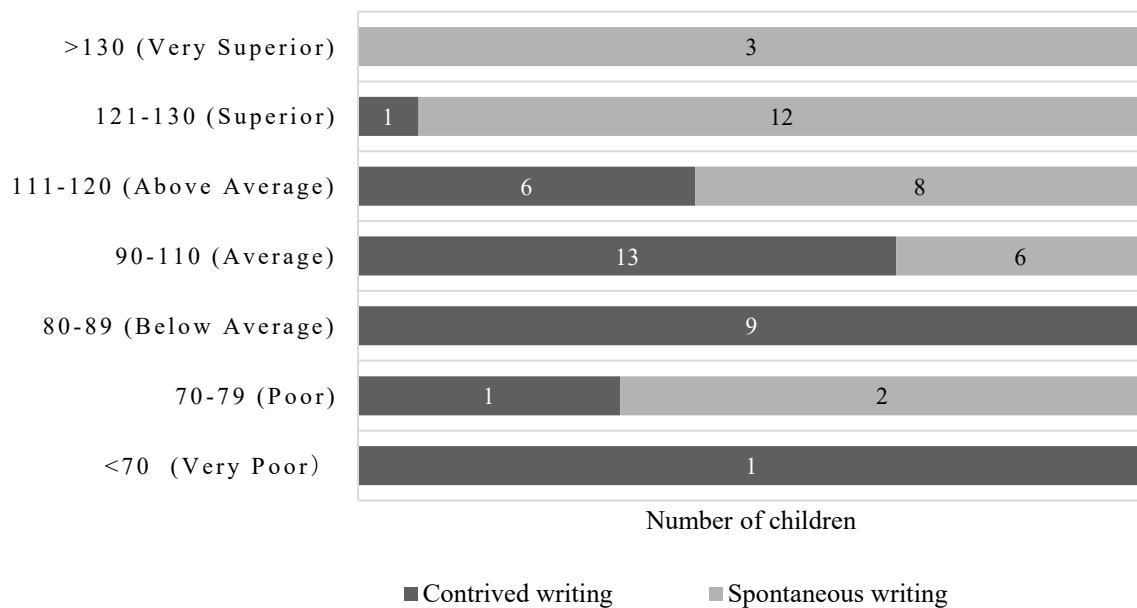
Performance in Specific Aspects of Contrived and Spontaneous Writing

To examine their performance in the seven subtests of the two writing formats, we look at the children's age-based scaled scores. A scaled score of eight to 12 indicates writing ability in a particular subtest that is within the *Average* range. Scores above 12 indicate *Above Average* to *Very Superior* ability, whereas scores below eight suggest *Below Average* to *Very Poor* ability.

Among the five subtests for contrived writing, the children were weakest in vocabulary and spelling. Figure 4 indicates that 58.1% of the children scored either *Poor* ($n = 6$) or *Below Average* ($n = 12$) for vocabulary, and 74.2% scored either *Very Poor* ($n = 6$), *Poor* ($n = 8$), or *Below Average* ($n = 9$) for spelling. However, the children performed much better on the remaining subtests.

Figure 3

Contrived Versus Spontaneous Writing Performance (composite index scores)



Twenty-three (74.2%) scored in the *Average* range for punctuation, with 21 (67.7%) doing the same for logical sentences, and 17 (54.8%) for sentence combining. Several children also scored *Above Average* or higher for these three subtests. Notably, for sentence combining, quite a few children (38.7%) scored within the *Above Average* (n = 5), *Superior* (n = 6) and *Very Superior* (n = 1) levels.

The children did better in the subtests for spontaneous than for contrived writing. Figure 5 shows that 29 (93.5%) children's scaled scores were within the *Average* to *Very Superior* ranges for both the contextual conventions and story composition subtests, i.e., they received scores of eight or higher. The spontaneous writing task involves writing a story based on a picture stimulus within 20 minutes (including five minutes for planning). The story is scored for the quality of its composition, particularly its vocabulary, prose, plot, and organization. Figure 5 shows good scores for contextual conventions, but story composition scores were better with 20 children (64.5%) achieving a score of 13 or higher, i.e., *Above Average* to *Very Superior* levels (versus eight children for contextual conventions). Nevertheless, two of our younger participants (aged nine and 10) received scores in the *Poor* range for story composition because their story merely described the picture and had a weak plot.

While the children's weaker spelling scores in contrived writing suggest some inadequacy in their understanding of writing conventions, this was not the case for contextual conventions tested in spontaneous writing, because spelling (including capitalization) comprises only five of the 21 scoring criteria. The contextual conventions subtest also evaluated punctuation (six items), sentence construction (seven items), paragraph construction (two items), and article use (one item) —areas where the children could demonstrate their abilities. Specifically, many children were able to construct compound sentences, insert introductory clauses and phrases, and write two paragraphs or more (with two or more sentences in each paragraph).

Figure 4
Performance in the Contrived Writing Format (scaled scores)

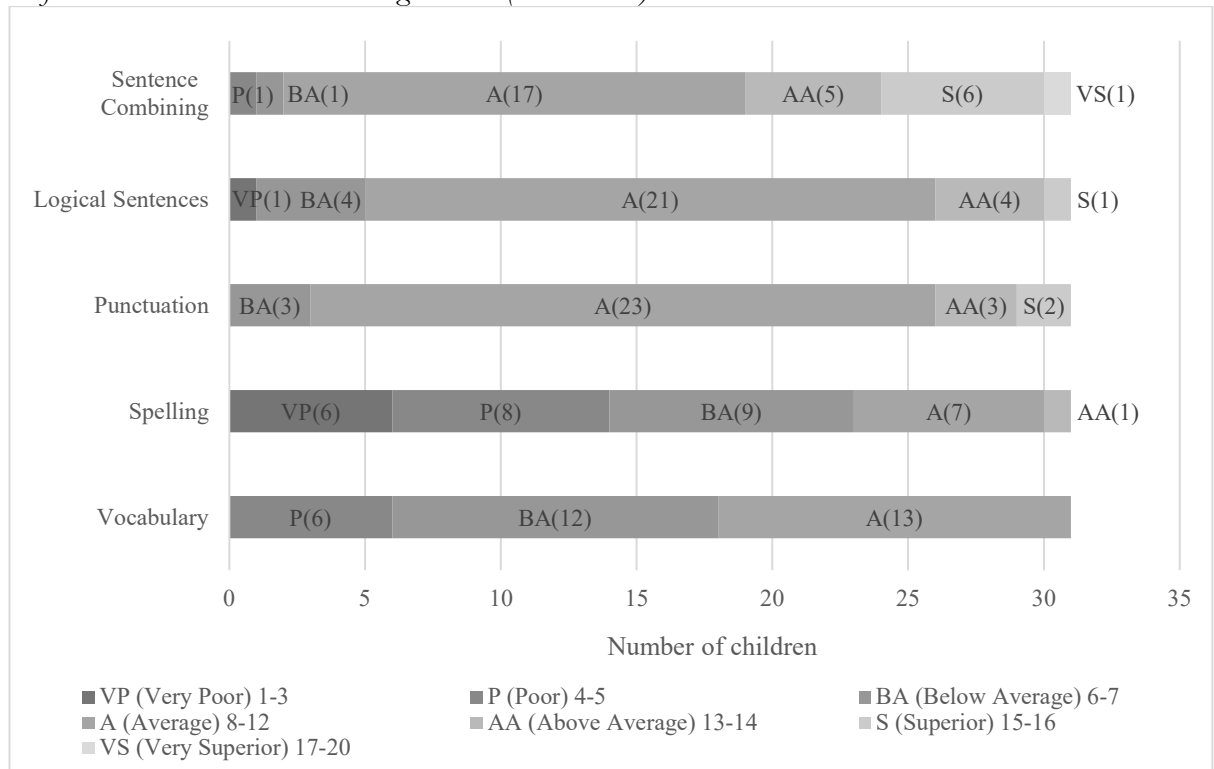
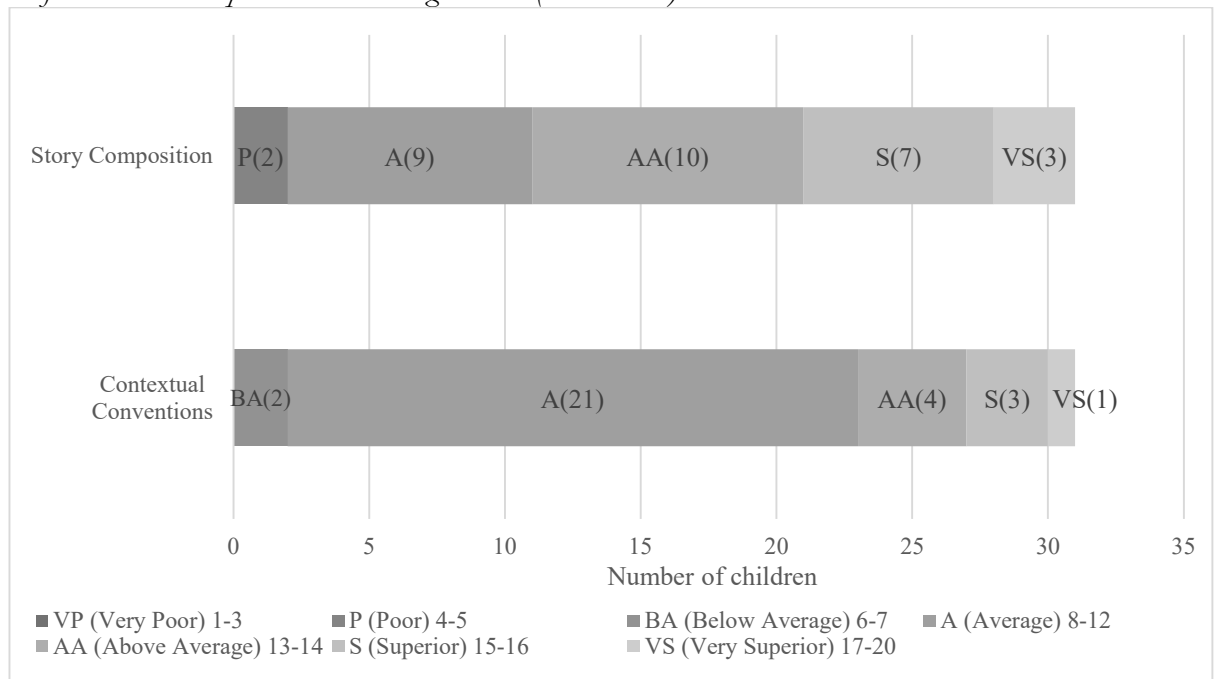


Figure 5
Performance in the Spontaneous Writing Format (scaled scores)



Samples of the children’s actual writing can illustrate their spontaneous writing abilities more clearly. Figure 6 is an excerpt from the story written by LIS (23 in Table 1) whose contextual conventions received a high total scaled score of 18 (*Very Superior*). The

beginning of her story shows some well-constructed compound sentences. In addition, LIS was able to use introductory phrases and clauses (e.g., *After the fight*, *In the distance*, *When the man was out*) in the second half of her story.

Figure 6

Use of Contextual Conventions by LIS (age 12;10.12)

Fire! The house was in flames, so bright and red it was hard to look at. The windows were melting, and the trees around the house were on fire. Ella was trembling from head to toe, and she felt sad and scared at the same time. That was May's house.

The children's stories were also evaluated based on story composition such as how it begins and ends, its plot development, characters' emotions, vocabulary, and writing style. Almost all the children did well in this section by using their imagination. Their stories went beyond the stimulus picture of a burning tree in a thunderstorm.

Figure 7

Story Composition by AMS (age 11;6.21)

It was a sunny day, The wether man said it was an sunny sunny day. 1/1. The first day of somer. Staice & her mother was making cake's in the kichen wen Ben & his farther was out sid with ther Dog, Spoty. This famly was qwit an ugiwal. ther was something difrint. If you look clowser you will see ther seacrit. Mom & Staice wer not making Cake's. they wer gating rady for Staice's poshun test. & ther Dog spoty is not a dog it is an Copyer. It can chaing it's look's. yes, this famly is an magic family.

In Figure 7, AMS (20 in Table 1) composed a story about a family of wizards in the middle of a potion test when a storm hits. The story had many spelling mistakes, such as *somer* ("summer"), *qwit an ugiwal* ("quite unusual"), *ther seacrit* ("their secret") and *poshun* ("potion"). AMS's writing also had fragmented sentences and noun-verb disagreements. However, she wrote an engaging beginning to a unique story and demonstrated good story composition. Her opening paragraph led to a climax where the mother wizard conjured up firemen to extinguish the fire. Her story composition scored 17, in the *Very Superior* range.

Discussion

We know very little about how simultaneous bilingualism can develop into biliteracy successfully. Given their bilingual exposure since birth, there is much potential for BFLA children to achieve a high level of bilingualism and biliteracy even when only one of their languages is taught at school. Nakamura's (2019) qualitative study suggested that bilingual children can acquire literacy in a non-societal language when their learning is supported by their parents and weekend school. Our current investigation extends that study by assessing the English writing ability of Japanese-English BFLA children attending the same weekend school in Tokyo studied by Nakamura and another one in Yokohama. The objective and rigorous TOWL revealed not only that 19 out of our 31 participants (61.3%) obtained an overall writing composite index score within the *Average* range, but that eight obtained scores within the *Above Average* to *Very Superior* range. Thus, 27 (87.1%) performed at age-appropriate levels. These results show that BFLA children can achieve high levels of English literacy without level-appropriate instruction in mainstream education. Non-societal language learning usually wanes at older ages as children drop out of weekend school (Douglas, 2008), but our study demonstrates that it can be sustained at high levels in middle childhood and beyond. The consistent English exposure that many of the children received from birth until their present age (as shown by their language history at four different points in their childhood in Figure 1) likely provided a conducive home environment for their English literacy to grow.

Our participants performed better in the TOWL spontaneous than in the contrived writing format. Most of the children could produce a well-structured and creative story (e.g., with the use of compound sentences and introductory clauses) probably because they have been exposed to many stories from an early age. This was revealed in Nakamura's (2019) interviews with some parents from the Tokyo weekend school who had regular joint reading sessions with their children. Both weekend schools assign daily reading usually from online reading resources subscribed to by the school, so parents would regularly read with younger children or encourage older ones to read independently to satisfy this homework requirement. The children may also have applied story planning skills which they have acquired in Japanese. Typical Grade 3 *Kokugo* (“[Japanese] national language”) textbooks require children in Japanese elementary schools to plan and write an essay by the end of the third grade (around the age of our youngest participants). Extended writing projects (including story planning) and speed writing tasks taught in the weekend school probably contributed to their writing fluency and self-regulatory skills, particularly in their ability to compose a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

In contrast, the children's weaker performance in contrived writing tasks, particularly spelling, indicates that they have yet to master transcription skills. Our children particularly struggle with spelling because unlike bedtime reading, spelling tests and dictation are highly structured literacy activities that parents report are not easy to do and not often done at home. Moreover, while weekend-school teachers conduct spelling and dictation exercises, they are not the central feature of their classes. The spelling of English words is also often quite different from their spoken sound equivalents, and the children may have lacked opportunities to practice connecting phonology with orthography in English. Their school language, Japanese, has three different scripts that may also influence their writing. Two of them—*hiragana* and *katakana*—are learnt the earliest (with the third script, *kanji* or Chinese characters, mastered later). These two phonetic lettering systems have one-to-one letter-sound correspondences that English lacks. Japanese words can also be transcribed in *romaji* (romanized spelling used to transliterate Japanese) which emphasizes the letter-sound

relationship, and this may also affect the children's English spelling ability. This could be seen in Figure 7 where AMS's spelling mistakes clearly reflect her pronunciation.

Other than spelling, the children had weaker scores on the vocabulary subtest of the contrived writing format. They may not have adequate English vocabulary because they are schooled in Japanese. They are missing the rich school experience that Hammill and Larsen (2009) mention can result in better performance in the contrived writing format. The limited and informal nature of the children's English literacy learning is thus reflected in their weaker spelling and vocabulary scores. In contrast, they generally did better on the logical sentences and sentence combining subtests of the contrived writing section. They were able to detect the illogicality of the sentences given and revise them so that they made sense. They were also capable of stringing multiple pieces of information from two or more sentences to form one coherent and grammatically correct sentence. These cognitive abilities are probably transferred from their Japanese education to their English writing.

Conclusion

The TOWL results have allowed us to determine the range in English writing proficiency (and strengths and weaknesses) of Japanese-English children attending parent-run English weekend schools in Japan. Many children scored within the *Average* range and quite a few in the *Above Average* to *Very Superior* range. Most of the children did well in spontaneous writing but less so in contrived writing, particularly in spelling and vocabulary. This finding can help parents and teachers at the weekend schools to identify and support areas of weakness in children's writing.

Attending the weekend school with home support from their parents undoubtedly helped our participants to attain a commendable level of English literacy. The prestige of English as a Foreign Language in Japan is not a satisfactory explanation for the children's writing achievements, so our next step is to investigate the specific home language practices, weekend school involvement, and child factors that contribute to their English literacy. This paper reports only on the initial stage of a longitudinal project. As such, it is limited in terms of the number of participants and cross-sectional age samples as fewer bilingual children continue learning at weekend school at older ages. Nevertheless, we are recruiting more children and tracking their English literacy development longitudinally to determine if their writing improves with time. Establishing the English literacy level of our participants is the first important step as we seek to determine how minority language literacy can be sustained and successfully supported in BFLA children at older ages. This study also suggests that the parent-run weekend school model can be an invaluable grassroots initiative to supplement home practices for the development of non-societal language literacy. Parents who combine their resources can build a community within the weekend school that allows their children to play and learn together in the non-societal language. The potential of such bottom-up efforts in nurturing bilingualism and biliteracy in families and communities is an exciting direction in minority language education research.

Funding

This work was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science under the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (21K00740).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the children, parents, and teachers of the two weekend schools who graciously participated in our research. We also thank Joy Taniguchi for reviewing our

Japanese abstract and the two anonymous reviewers who provided helpful comments. Any errors are entirely our own.

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