

# Functions and genres of ESL children's English writing at home and at school

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Drawing on a sociocultural perspective of genre as a social action situated in a particular context, this study examined the functions and genres of four second-grade ESL (English as a Second Language) children's English writing at home and at school. The two boys and two girls were born and raised in Canada, speaking English at school and with their siblings, and Cantonese at home with their parents. A total of 67 pieces of school writing and 54 pieces of home writing were collected over a five-week period. Findings show that home writing exhibit a wider range of functions and genres than school writing. The study suggests that teachers should be aware of the value of the writing opportunities and contexts bicultural children have at home and, therefore, incorporate such home experiences into classroom teaching to enrich the process of literacy development.

## Introduction

Most studies of young children's written genres have focused on children whose first language is English (e.g., Chapman, 1994, 1995; Donovan, 2001; Newkirk, 1987; Tower, 2002). As North America becomes more linguistically and culturally diverse, there has been an increasing interest in exploring the writing of young children who speak English as a second language. Although extensive research has examined the development of genres among adult or college level ESL students in academic settings (e.g., Hyland, 2003), little research has investigated the written discourse of ESL children and the social contexts of their writing, particularly writing activities that they initiate. It is this gap in the literature that gave rise to the present study. Drawing on a social constructivist perspective of genres as social actions situated in particular contexts, this study examined four ESL Grade 2 children's production of written genres in and out of school. This was done

in order to gain a deeper understanding of literacy development among children whose lives involve more than one language and more than one culture. Whereas monocultural and monolingual children do not face choices about language (and its accompanying system of writing) and which cultural framework to draw from while learning how to write, children with a background like those discussed in this paper acquire literacy under much more complex circumstances as they move between the languages and cultures which encompass their lives. In order to better understand the writing of these children, who may use one language in school and another at home, it is essential to examine the existing and the potential relationships between school-based and home-based literacy activities. That is what the study reported here attempted to do by exploring the children's writing development and use of genre knowledge in home and school-based writing contexts. Because of the limited scope of the study, we confined our investigation to the children's writing in English only.

### **Theoretical framework**

Genres have traditionally been perceived as regularized forms of writing that can be divided into categories and subcategories and taught to students. To help empower non-mainstream students for success in schools, the scholars of the Sydney School of genre have recommended a structural approach to genre learning through imitation of models and learning of textual features (Christie, 1993; Martin, 1993). The structural approach focuses on form, with expansion of students' genre repertoires fostered through explicit instruction. In contrast, recent views of the New Rhetoric School suggest that genre instruction should focus on thinking and communicating instead of textual features. The formal features of a genre are thus seen not as ends in themselves but instead are related to "the writer's social motive in responding to a recurrent social situation of a certain type" (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 3). The understanding of genres as social actions is related to the Bakhtinian (1986) view that all language is dialogic: our use and understanding of words are developed through interactions with others in our communities and cultures. Rather than templates that writers slot their ideas into, Bakhtin regards genres as flexible and open-ended forms that grow out of the needs of interactive activities in particular contexts. Genres, as Swales (1990) defines them, are ways of communicating for certain communicative purposes which lead to specific rhetorical and linguistic choices.

As children develop literacy, be it in their native or second language, they learn through engaging in meaningful activities and interactions with literate others. Bakhtin (1986) pointed out that children learn genres through recontextualizing

or processing the words of others into their own speech or writing through a kind of social dialogue. Youngsters develop knowledge about the functions and forms of written language specific to particular situations through internationalization of the processes, practices, and genres as they experience them in their sociocultural contexts (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Based on the perception that genres are context-embedded, localized, and tied to specific time and space, Bakhtin (1986) makes a distinction between “primary genres” and “secondary genres.” The former are used in daily communicative activities and can be learned without formal instruction, whereas the latter are more highly developed and specialized academic or sociopolitical activities that are more distant from daily contexts. Similarly, Gee (1990) makes a distinction between what he calls “primary Discourses” that are learned initially at home with family and “secondary Discourses” that are learned through apprenticeship in social groups and institutions. Following Bakhtin (1986) and Gee (1990), we suggest that learning primary genres or discourses is an essential developmental task for young learners acquiring literacy, initially through home-based literacy experiences. As they begin formal schooling, children then acquire knowledge of secondary genres through school-based writing. This reconceptualization of literacy also questions the validity of school literacies that are separate from students’ personal experiences that involve “real world” literacies. A sociocultural view of literacy suggests a shift within genre studies from a focus on the cognitive learning of textual structures to diverse personal and social factors, and the intention of literacy events and practices. This theoretical perspective underlies the present investigation of a group of ESL children’s writing functions and genres at home and school.

### **Related literature**

The learning of genres is an emergent process similar to other aspects of writing development (Chapman, 1994, 1995). Newkirk (1987) argues that young children are frequently exposed to, and hence familiar with, the use of writing in their literacy environments even before they enter school. Indeed, researchers have found that children’s genre awareness starts to develop as early as kindergarten. Donovan (2001), for example, reported that kindergarteners are able to differentiate between narrative and expository genres even before they can write with conventional spelling. Similarly, Kamberelis (1999) and Kamberelis and Bovino (1999) found that children from kindergarten to second grade are able to write science-related “reports”, an expository genre commonly found in language arts programmes for primary children. In another study, Zecker (1996) demonstrated that Grade 1 writers show knowledge of text characteristics even before they are able to produce

conventionally recognizable texts. Such emergent knowledge of genre, as researchers have reported, is developed as children imitate adults' uses of literacy in their play (Anderson, 1994) and appropriate classroom community genres such as reading logs, reminder notes, agendas, and records of attendance (Chapman, 1999).

Children construct their knowledge of genres from texts in their social worlds and produce a variety of genres, both narrative and non-narrative, in response to those found in their literacy environments (Chapman, 1995). In addition to stories, written genres produced by children include non-narrative writing: lists, letters, signs, club memberships, alphabet books, quizzes and certificates (Bissex, 1980; Newkirk, 1984; Taylor, 1982). Although there is a general understanding that children write for a purpose, it has been observed that school writing does not prepare children for writing in the real world for real purposes (Atwell, 1998; Edelsky & Smith, 1984). One reason, as Bissex (1980) suggests, is that real discourse for personal, cultural and social development can hardly be represented within the classroom. Classroom teachers often set writing tasks in accordance with personal teaching philosophies, beliefs about writing development, and curriculum outcomes. Writing assignments are typically constrained by parameters such as instructional purposes and school and board policies. Since writing topics and prompts are set by teachers, there is often a lack of a real audience. Such a limitation of school-based writing assignments has been observed in a literacy ethnography conducted by Early and Gunderson (1993) in a Vancouver school with a mixed student population of Canadian and immigrant families. To compensate for the limited literacy practices in the school context, researchers suggest that literacy instruction can draw on children's out of school literacy practices (Alverman, Xu, & Carpenter, 2003; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Kenner, 2000). In a case study of the home literacies of a bilingual child, Kenner (1997) found that connecting children's everyday literacy experiences at home and school provides opportunities for multilingual writing which helps children from diverse cultural and social backgrounds develop literacy knowledge. Stone (2005) also demonstrated in a children's book writing workshop for middle school youths how her students drew upon popular and cultural representations in their stories to connect their out-of-school lives with school literacy practices meaningfully.

While writing in school settings shows the impact of classroom curriculum and mode of instruction on the child's writing repertoire, writing in the home setting is often more geared towards personal expression and communication of ideas and information, free from constraints imposed by task prompts. Several researchers have taken interest in the influences of home and school contexts and their interaction on the writing development of ESL students. McCarthy and Garcia (2005) found that elementary English language learners engage in a variety of writing practices at home and at school, and that their writing practices and

attitudes are influenced by home backgrounds and classroom contexts. Likewise, Li (2002) observed how some Chinese immigrant children's literacy development was affected by their lives outside the classroom: their home environment, the availability and use of print at home, and their parents' social capital. She was impressed by the parents' devotion to the children's success in school and their integration into Canadian society, but lamented over the lack of home and school interconnectedness in some of the cases. In another study, Xu (1999) described the home literacy experiences of six Chinese ESL kindergarteners and observed how they made functional use of English at home and in the community. The researcher's findings reflect the diverse and cultural nature of the children's home literacy experiences, manifested in access to a wide range of print materials and writing supplies, and parents' and other family members' engagement in the functional use of print across different social contexts. Another important element was the family's interaction with the children in using print for meaningful purposes, and engaging the children in a wide variety of literacy activities both in Chinese and in English. These research findings suggest that children's literacy development was the product of social learning from their culture and their interaction within it. In more specific terms, the amount and quality of writing opportunities affect students' writing development, be it in their first or second language (McCarthy, Guo, & Cummins, 2005).

In general, research has shown that home writing is a rich source for understanding ESL children's local literacies, their sociocultural ways of representing their culture and community, and the effect of social influences, such as cultural beliefs and rhetorical styles, on their literacy development in school (McCarthy & Garcia, 2005). However, how these literacy activities beyond school relate to or impact school-based literacy practices and growth is not yet well understood. More research is, therefore, needed in this area to unravel the possible connections between the in- and out-of-school worlds of young English language learners' literacy practices. An investigation into the genres and functions of home and school writing will help illuminate and hence bridge the gap between the children's home and school culture. Such research will also allow us to see how children draw on social and cultural resources from home in their development as writers.

### **Purpose of the study**

The study described here examined the relationships between children's genres and purposes for writing at home as well as at school. We compared four Grade 2 children's writing in academic and family/community contexts to explore their genre and function repertoires. Specific research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the differences between the functions of the children's English writing at school and in their home or community?
2. What is the range of genres in the focal children's school and home/community writing in English?

## Method

### *Participants*

The study was conducted in an urban area in British Columbia, Canada. The four participants were a subset of the focal children (Grade 2) in a larger study, Young Children's Informational Literacy (YCIL). In most primary classrooms, the vast majority of texts are narratives, which is felt to hinder children's success in school when the children move to the higher grades and need to read more non-narrative genres (Duke, 2000; Pappas, 1993). In the YCIL project, teachers were provided with funds to buy children's information books (books whose primary function is to provide information about the social and natural world, sometimes referred to as factual, non-narrative, or expository texts). The teachers were asked to use these books during whole-class and small group reading activities, to allow children to read them independently, and to incorporate informational writing in their instructional programmes.

The four students, two boys and two girls, aged seven to eight, attended an elementary school located in a working class community. These children were selected from the same class and had similar linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. All were ESL children born and raised in Canada. Their parents were immigrants from Mainland China or Hong Kong. Their first language was Cantonese, which was spoken at home. Although English was their second language, it was the language they used for learning and communicating with their friends at school and for written communication at both school and home with their siblings. The children worked with two teachers. One of the two teachers, who taught the class full-time before she started co-teaching with another teacher in the second school term, rated two of the children, Katie and William (all participating children's names are pseudonyms), as average and the other two, Elaine and John, above average based on their Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver, 2001) scores and samples of writing.

### *School context*

The public elementary school they studied in enrolled approximately 500 children from kindergarten through Grade 7 from the local neighborhood. The

participating children were in a Grade 2 class with 22 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, mostly Asian.

As noted earlier, two teachers, who spoke English only, shared the instructional responsibilities. School writing experiences consisted of responses to their reading, personal writing in journals, and also completing worksheets designed by the teachers. School reading was, as discussed previously, centered around informational texts.

### *Home and community contexts*

While coming from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the children's families were slightly different in social economic status. The parents' length of residence in Canada ranged from 15 to 27 years. William's mother was employed, and used both English and Chinese in her daily work and home life. Katie's mother worked from home and used English occasionally in her work. In comparison, both Elaine's and John's mothers were housewives and knew very little English. With the exception of John's father, who worked part-time, the fathers all had steady jobs. The home environments were quite similar, except for John, who had to share a bedroom with his elder sister in their basement home.

The mothers were all literate in their native language and spoke Cantonese for daily communication. Only William's mother was fluent in both spoken and written English. The fathers of the children were all literate in Chinese and English. They had finished secondary education in their home country. John's father could also speak a little French, the family having lived in Quebec for five years before moving to Vancouver. While the parents' educational levels varied from elementary school to university, they all placed great emphasis on their children's schooling. Like most Chinese immigrant parents, they had great hopes for their children's success in school and beyond. In addition, the parents had great trust in and high expectations for the teachers in terms of structuring and disciplining their children's learning, based on their traditional belief in, and respect for, the authority of schools and teachers.

There were similarities in the home literacy activities across all of the families. Basically, Chinese was used for social and cultural purposes. Print materials in the home were in abundance: newspapers, books, TV guides and magazines, all available in both English and Chinese. The parents mostly used Chinese for pleasure reading. Writing in Chinese, however, was not a common activity. In the past they had written letters in Chinese to communicate with their relatives and friends in their home country or elsewhere, but with the advent of technology, they had all switched to long distance telephone calls. The multiple literacies for everyday needs were almost all performed in English, such as writing out checks, filling in

forms, and writing to organizations or government authorities. The children also watched television and read comics and other popular culture texts in English, though the parents regulated the amount and type of TV viewing and wanted their children to read more “serious” materials, or books with “more educational value” such as information books or school-related texts.

The homes of the participating children were stocked with children's reading materials, though to different degrees. Katie's bookshelf had rows of hard cover versions of English literary classics, though they were not yet read. William's parents bought their children very expensive English book collections, read only occasionally because they were too difficult for the children. Elaine had many storybooks in English that her mother collected, and she read them often. There were also Chinese books brought over from China, which her mother read to her. Although John's family was the poorest financially, his mother let him purchase books from the school book sales. In addition, she had pasted the walls of the small living room with writing done by John and his elder sister (Grade 4) to serve as models of how to write. She was very proud of her children's writing.

Like most Chinese immigrants, the parents yearned for a preservation of their native language within their families. To foster cultural and ethnic ties with their home country, all except John's parents sent their children to a heritage language school to learn Chinese. Financial constraints prevented John from taking Chinese language classes, but his mother, who came from Mainland China, taught him how to write simple Chinese characters at home. For the children attending the heritage language school, the writing opportunities in the Chinese language school did not offer much opportunity for creative writing. Perhaps because the children had comparatively limited knowledge of Chinese, most of the practice consisted of repetitive exercises or imitating models.

There were also some English literacy opportunities in the community. All the mothers took their children on regular visits to the public library to read books and check out materials to bring home. They also went to book exhibitions and sometimes bought books from book sales at school. The parents all treasured such opportunities for literacy experiences and believed that reading out of school would help their children improve their English literacy skills and extend their knowledge of the world. It was interesting to note that all the mothers engaged in a type of home tutoring by setting writing tasks in English for the children to do at home, even though most of them lacked fluency in their own written English. The purpose of this home writing was mainly to practice writing in English, though sometimes the writing activities also served a social purpose, such as designing and writing a birthday card to send to a cousin. Responses from the children ranged from a reluctant compliance with such demands to engaging actively in self-initiated writing for the love of it.

Embarking on a study to examine the links between the home and school literacy practices of these ESL children, we had wanted to look at both English and the heritage language in these relationships. However, it was noted that the children did not write in Chinese at all in their voluntary writing at home. The only text they produced in Chinese was the homework for the Chinese heritage language school. As mentioned above, this writing was confined to practice of Chinese characters, completion of worksheets, and making sentences with given words. There was no creative writing at all, not at their stage of learning the language. Thus, their home writing was entirely in English. Code switching (between Chinese and English), which is commonly found in the writing of second language children born and educated initially in their home country, appeared only in their speech, not in their writing. This may have been because their voluntary writing afforded free choice of content and form, and they likely chose English because, as they said in their interviews, Chinese characters were difficult for them to produce.

### *Data collection*

Naturalistic data sources, which were employed for five weeks from April to May, 2005, were used for the study. In order to learn about the home and school contexts, there were interviews of the children and their parents at the beginning and the end of the study, informal conversations with the teachers during the five week period, weekly observations in the classroom, and three field observations in the children's homes. We collected a total of 67 pieces of school writing and 54 pieces of home writing in English from the four children within the sampling period. The school writing consisted of all the written work done as class assignments scheduled in the teacher's weekly plan — texts composed in the day-to-day learning activities in the classroom. These included writing done in class under the teacher's instruction and supervision, and also written assignments completed at home, such as journal writing. No specific instructions were given as to the amount or frequency of writing to be done at home. The children were asked to write as much or as little as they wanted. The home writing we collected included self-initiated pieces, such as texts they normally wrote for fun, for expressing themselves, or at the request or demand of the family. As part of the research, the children were asked to sort their home writing into different types according to their content and purpose. They were also requested to assign a genre name to each set of the writing samples based on their own knowledge of genres, and to place them in different folders.

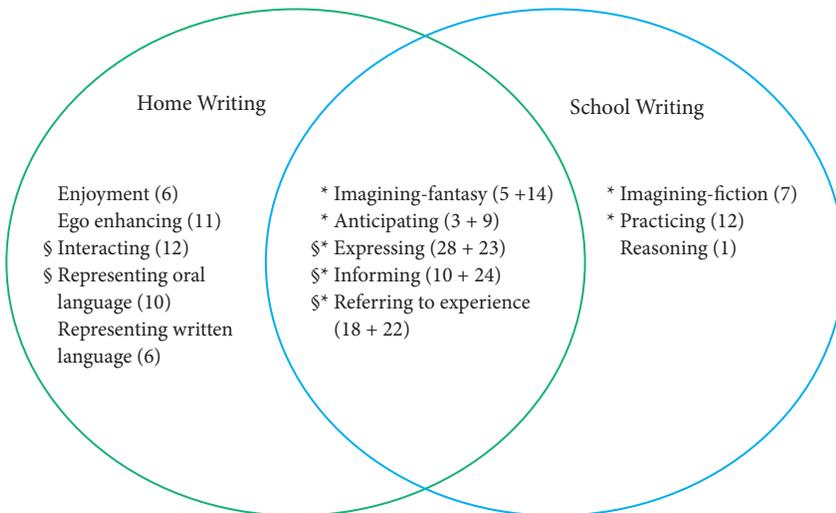
*Data analyses*

The analyses focused on the communicative functions and the type and range of genres. Using a method adapted from Chapman (1995), derived from Halliday's work on the functions of language (1973), we coded the children's written texts in terms of functions with reference to the topic, content, and lexicogrammar. In identifying the genres, we started with the children's naming of the genres and then sorted them into different groups, namely, chronologies, descriptions, interactions and word plays, taking into account their substance, form and function, using a classification system developed by Chapman (1995). Based on the analyses, a total of 13 functions were identified (See Appendix A for the functions and definitions). The present writing samples also revealed 3 genres in school writing and 10 genres in home writing (See Appendix B for the genres and definitions).

**Results and discussion**

*Functions of writing at school and home*

As noted earlier, we identified 13 different functions in the two sets of data, school writing (67 samples) and home writing (54 samples). Figure 1 shows, apart from 5



**Figure 1.** Functions of writing across contexts

§ Functions found in all focal children's home writing

\* Functions found in all focal children's school writing

( ) Number of instances; in functions found in both home and school writing, the first number represents home, the second, school

Name \_\_\_\_\_ ✓

A **paragraph** is a group of sentences that tells about one topic. The sentences in a paragraph should be written in order.

On the lines below, write a paragraph, using the words provided for the first word in each sentence.

Imagine that you are the teacher for a day. What will you do in your classroom?

If I was teacher for a day, first I will let the class do art first then do math, then they can have choosing-time then it is recess time!

Next, the class will read a book together after the class do some work. If they are not done they can't do activity box to instead to win a prize!

Then, they finish their art when they finish show it to me then show their art. If they don't I will show the class.

Finally, everyone clean up then get ready to go home want and say bye to me for being a teacher for a day. Now go home everyone go home you will see your teacher on Friday!



#7547 Writing Skills and Grammar—Grade 3 30 © Teacher Created Materials, Inc.

Figure 2. Worksheet exercise to practice paragraph development

functions that were found in both school and home writing, that there was a greater variety of communicative functions in the children's home writing (5 functions) in comparison to functions unique to school (3 functions).

Of the 3 functions found only in school writing, *practicing* was the most dominant and was observed in 12 samples from the four children. This suggests that writing tasks in classrooms served pragmatic purposes revolving around learning about written language in general and specific writing skills such as the use of commas, connectives, paragraph development, and narratives of personal experiences. Imitation of writing practices introduced by the teachers was the way in which writing was presented to the children and the kind of writing practice expected of them. The writing sample in Figure 2 is an example of John practicing paragraph development.

With respect to home-based writing, we identified 5 functions (Figure 1). In the home, where much of the writing was self-initiated, the children used language in a lively and creative manner for different purposes and intended audiences. To some extent this was not unexpected, since the home context might be more conducive to writing for personal and social purposes when compared with the more controlled and practical writing expected at school. Home writing was more varied, as the children aimed at personal expression informed by their individual

~~and dressing gown.~~  
 Good morning mommy  
 ah & daddy! I already  
 brush my teeth and  
 changed clothes.  
 You don't have to worry  
 about yelling at me so  
 I finished everything  
 To: mom and dad  
 From:

Figure 3. Katie's note to her parents

writing intentions rather than following the teacher's instructional agenda, thus giving full rein to their imagination and expression. For example, 6 pieces of home writing were done for *Enjoyment* or self-entertainment, where language was used as a source for fun. Driven by a desire to craft text, the children found writing not only enjoyable but also *Ego enhancing* (a function identified in 11 pieces of writing). The children drew on their social and cultural resources and built on them as they wrote. In their writing to *represent oral language* (10 pieces of writing) and *written language* (6 pieces of writing), the participating children likewise made full use of the linguistic and graphic resources available to them in the various contexts. Literacy development was thus incorporated in their use of writing, drawing, and talking to compose meaning. In addition, the function of *Interacting* was observed in 12 samples from the four children. Such writing, as in the example from Katie (Figure 3), illustrates children's understanding of how to direct their writing at a specific and real audience. Please note that the name of the child writer has been deleted to hide her identity.

### *Genres in school and home writing*

*School genres.* Three genres were identified in the focal children's school writing: *story*, *journal*, and *listing* of items. As Table 1 shows, journal writing was the most

**Table 1.** Genres in school writing (frequencies and percentages)

	Story	Journal	List	Total
Elaine	3 (20%)	8 (53%)	4 (27%)	15 (100%)
Katie	5 (28%)	9 (50%)	4 (22%)	18 (100%)
John	4 (22%)	9 (50%)	5 (28%)	18 (100%)
William	3 (19%)	9 (56%)	4 (25%)	16 (100%)
Total	15 (22%)	35 (52%)	17 (26%)	67 (100%)

dominant genre, comprising nearly half the total number of uses of the three genres, with stories and lists each constituting close to one quarter of the uses.

The *stories* were compositions about events, either real or fictional (based on the children's fantasies), narrated in chronological order. Whether the children wrote about and commented on actions or events that took place in their everyday world or the world of their imagination, the major function was to record or report personal or group experiences. They were often written on a given topic or a prompt, for example, 'One boiling hot day...' or 'One morning I woke up and discovered I had shrunk to the size of an ant!' In some cases, the children wrote expanded stories continually over a period of several weeks in response to a prompt assigned by the teacher. Where they stopped at a certain point, the teacher would give further prompts to instruct and encourage them to continue writing according to the evolving story grammar. Thus, the narratives were supplemented by some teacher scaffolding. The outcome in such cases was a long narrative, often imaginary and fantastical, of several pages with a basic schematic structure, complete with orientation, complication, resolution, coda, and even evaluation. While the primary function underlying this writing was exercising the imagination, such writing was also used to express emotions and attitudes, to inform, and to show the possession of particular kinds of knowledge.

*Journals*, written in a journal exercise book, were roughly divided between chronologies and descriptions. In the case of the latter, the writer's focus was on objects and their attributes rather than actions or events. The topic or theme was suggested by the teacher. The chronologies were records of time-sequenced events, of activities done over the weekend, or predictions of what would be done on a certain day. In descriptions, the child-writer described or commented on an object referent and its attributes. This could be experiential, something experienced by the child in the real world, or imaginary, an object created out of the child's mind. The following journal entry from William (Figure 4) is an example of a chronology in which he described the sequence of planting a seed to inform, to express his feelings, and to anticipate future events, adding a labeled picture to convey more information.

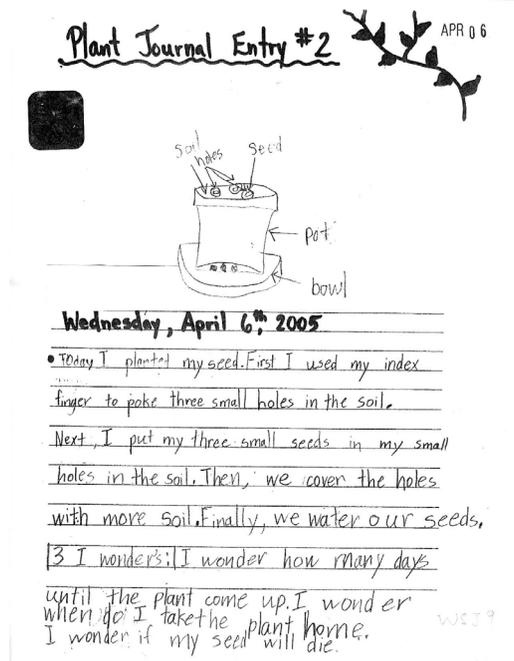


Figure 4. William's chronological journal entry

The third type, *list*, was mainly in the form of worksheet exercises where students provided the kinds of information requested in the prompts. Some were writing exercises related to specific writing skills, such as how to develop a paragraph, and the use of commas. For others, the children were asked to draw up a list of attributes to describe a given object or place, such as the community they were living in. Some were descriptions of real objects, while others were imaginary creations, such as a list of things a student would do if he/she were a teacher for one day. The following (Figure 5) is an example from John, who was listing ways to make his community even better.

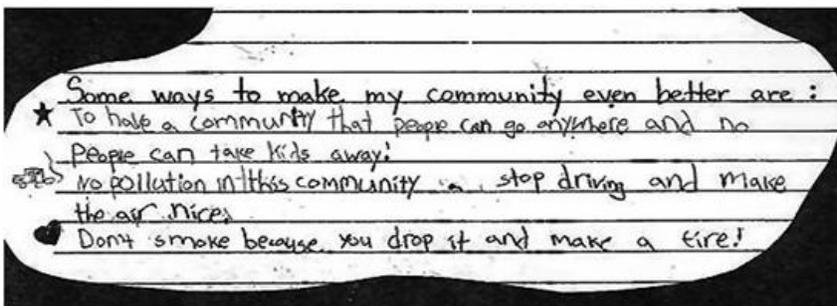


Figure 5. A list of ways to make a community better

**Table 2.** Genres in home writing (frequencies and percentages)

	Story	Journal	Drawing	Diary	My favou- rite things	Non- fiction writing	Greeting card	Note	Poem	Joke	Total
Elaine	3 (16%)	4 (21%)	-	-	-	1 (5%)	-	3 (16%)	3 (16%)	5 (26%)	19 (100%)
Katie	-	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	-	-	-	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	3 (30%)	-	10 (100%)
John	4 (20%)	8 (40%)	-	2 (10%)	5 (25%)	-	1 (5%)	-	-	-	20 (100%)
William	-	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-	3 (60%)	-	-	-	5 (100%)
Total	7 (13%)	15 (28%)	3 (6%)	2 (4%)	5 (9%)	1 (2%)	6 (11%)	4 (7%)	6 (11%)	5 (9%)	54 (100%)

*Home genres.* Children's home writing exhibited a greater variety of genres than did the school-based writing, as seen in Table 2, with a total of 10 genres identified in the home writing context.

Elaine wrote in six different genres, both John and Katie wrote in five genres, and William wrote in three. While *stories* and *journals* occurred more frequently, as was true in their school writing, home writing showed an interesting array of genres, with names suggested by the children, as noted earlier: *greeting cards*, *drawings*, *diaries*, *descriptions of favourite things*, *notes*, *poems*, *jokes* and *non-fiction writing*. They divided their writing samples into different categories and assigned a genre name to each one of them. This process reflected their emerging understanding and knowledge of the notion of genres as they drew upon their perceptions of the characteristics, functions, and features of the various genres they had learned about and practiced writing in and out of school.

Elaine and John, the two more able writers based on the first teacher's rating, wrote stories at home. John wrote imaginary stories, whereas Elaine wrote narratives that recorded real events in her daily home and school life, such as what she found in the garden while getting up one morning and how her class won the raffle ticket sale competition. All four children wrote journals, and in these they showed a distinct preference for chronologies of real life experiences. This was unlike the journal writing they performed at school, which included descriptions as well as chronologies. At home the children wrote more widely about their experiences within their family or their daily out-of-school life and activities. There were no restrictions on the topics or content of their writing. Writing was used as a tool for recording and sharing interesting experiences and knowledge with others.

Several other genres marked home writing from that of school. For example, while interactions, in which writing was used to communicate with others, were not found in the children's school writing, they were present in their home writing in the form of *greeting cards*, *notes*, and *written dialogues*. Greeting cards (birthday cards, thank-you cards, and Mother's Day cards) were found among three of the children's writing samples. These were a mixture of drawings, coloured pictures,

and messages of different sorts. For example, Katie wrote a greeting card to her younger sister to express her love. Simple as they were in language and discourse, these texts were all crafted for authentic purposes to represent the authors' feelings and emotions for others.

The child writers also wrote in varying detail about their social interactions with family members and in different kinds of situations in the form of *notes*. Notes were found in the two girls' home writing. Elaine wrote to 'note down' things in her daily life. Though there was no salutation at all in them, the texts were written with the clear intention of interacting with someone to share her daily life experience, such as her cousin dirtying her pants, and selling raffle tickets. Katie's note (Figure 3) showed more regularized features of a note, with a distinct salutation and the use of the prepositions 'To' and 'From' to denote interaction. It was an interesting message, written on the back cover of a writing pad, to her parents announcing that she was now able to brush her teeth and change her clothes on that particular day without having them "yelling" at her. Notes, in general, were an intelligent way to use written words to represent oral language, and to communicate messages that could be more conveniently conveyed in the written mode. The writing may have arisen from an attempt to avoid face-to-face interaction that could be awkward or embarrassing. The use of the written word provided the writer the choice of another channel of communication in which she could feel more secure or comfortable.

Other home genres, such as *drawings*, *diaries*, '*my favourite things*', and '*non-fiction writing*' contain descriptions of objects, some of which were things in the real world while others were imagined. The intention was to identify and provide information about an object, an entity, a desire or some anticipation. In the drawings, words were used to represent speech. "Speech bubbles" containing words, phrases or sentences appeared in a picture drawn to describe a person, such as his/her character or emotions. John had a collection of descriptions of the things he liked — his favourite juice, season, animal, month, and food. There were five pieces of such writing, which he called '*My favourite things*.' They were all examples of self-initiated writing that he used to express what he liked and his reasons for liking them. In comparison, Elaine's piece, which she labeled '*Non-fiction writing*' was a description of her experience of and feelings about reading a book on dinosaurs. Probably in an attempt to share with her readers what she learned in a book, she drew three dinosaurs and labeled them to accompany her writing. The *diary* was another distinctive genre in the children's home writing. John wrote two diary entries during the sampling period, each beginning with the salutation 'Dear Diary,' a format he might have learned at school or in other more formal contexts. In both entries, he expressed his wishes, including materialistic desires such as having more comic books and chapter books, and less realistic ones such as the

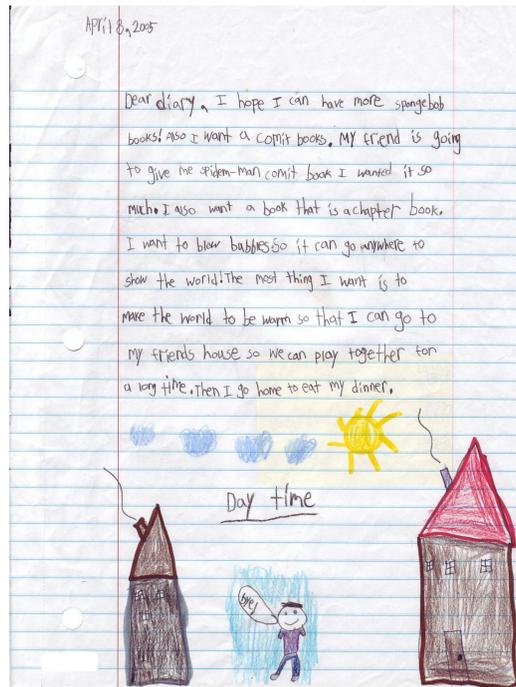


Figure 6. John's diary that expresses his wishes

world becoming warmer so that he could go to his friends' houses more often and play for a longer time. The diary entries were basically wish lists through which he expressed his innermost thoughts and desires, which he could hardly accomplish in the real world. Figure 6 shows one example.

Word plays are another genre specific to the children's home writing. In these texts the children played with words as objects and used them to represent oral language. They manipulated rhythm and rhyme to compose songs and verse. Sometimes they simply reworked words from familiar rhymes, jingles or poems rather than creating original verse. Play and enjoyment were the major functions. The children also wanted to "express emotions or attitude, interacting, referring to experiences and self-aggrandizement (i.e., showing what they know)" (Chapman, 1995, p.179). Word plays were found in the form of *poems* written by the two girls and *jokes* written by Elaine. The girls used a poetic form to express their feelings about things of nature and play, describing experiential or imaginative objects. For example, Elaine wrote a poem about a chronology of fantasy events based on a familiar nursery rhyme, with some of the words substituted to create a poem of her own. In comparison, Katie's poems showed more sophisticated formal features: her pieces came with a title, and the sentences were written in separate lines to form a stanza. The two girls demonstrated knowledge of the special features

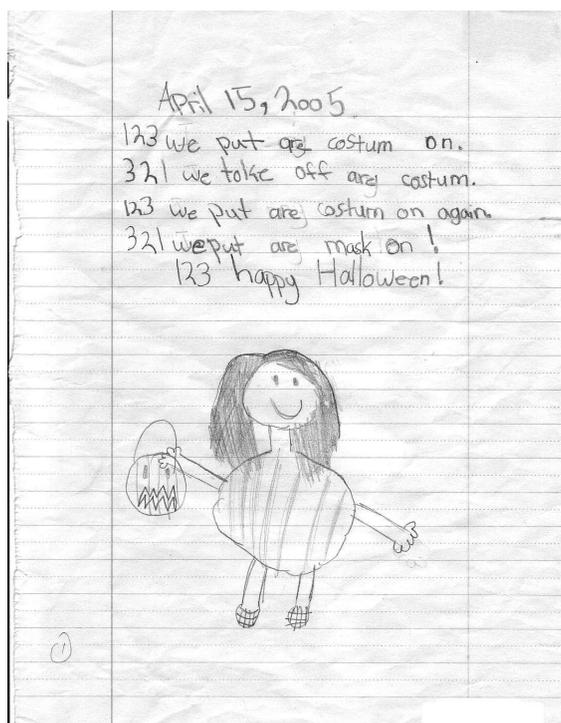


Figure 7. Elaine's poem

of the genre of poetry, and they showed how they could match a genre with the topic, content and intended function of the writing. The poem (Figure 7) about Halloween illustrates how Elaine used words and language to celebrate the beauty of her experience.

The analyses show how these young ESL children demonstrated their developing awareness of appropriate genre elements, organizational structures, and functions of writing. Each child incorporated and constructed their notions of what writing was about from both home experience and school learning. The four children wrote to record events or describe objects from their real life experiences or creations from an imaginary world. They also used words for play, enjoyment, and expressing their feelings and attitudes towards people in their writing. Compared with the children in similar studies (e.g., Chapman, 2002; Millard, 2005), these second graders showed more sophistication in their use of genres for achieving particular communicative functions, approximating mature genre forms in their social dialogue with texts written both at school and at home. These findings are encouraging, since acquiring genre knowledge is an important educational goal that will empower children for participation in adult life in academic and professional contexts (Richardson, 1998).

## Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study suggest that these L2 children's writing in the school context was confined by the writing curriculum and the instructional purposes it served. Constraints in classroom settings, such as teacher prompts and instructional objectives, limited the children's use of genres and functions. In other words, the children were limited to the writing resources available within the "secondary Discourses" (Gee, 1990) discussed earlier. Therefore, a limited variety of genres and functions was found in the children's school writing compared to those produced outside of school, where they wrote for many different communicative purposes and accessed the resources of their "primary Discourses" (Gee, 1990). When given a free choice of topic, form, and content in out-of-school writing, the children were able to exercise a much wider array of literacy skills and knowledge. They demonstrated a good sense of the rhetorical possibilities that various genres made available to them. In other words, when setting out to create texts to fulfill a social, personal, or cultural purpose, especially in the home context, the children were able to choose an appropriate genre to match their personal intentions and social functions.

The children's home writing was impressive for its richness in the range and diversity of genres and functions when compared with texts produced at school. This finding is consistent with studies of young native English-speaking writers, such as Bissex's (1980) study of the writing done by her son from 5 to 9 years of age, who produced many more kinds of writing at home than at school. Similarly, a study by Duke and Purcell-Gates (2003) has shown differences in the types of writing that children were exposed to at home and at school. Yet in some ways, the greater variety of functions and genres in home writing in comparison to school found in the present study was somewhat surprising. First of all, the teachers, as participants in the YCIL project, were encouraged to have the children write in a broader range of genres (especially information-based) rather than emphasizing narrative, which is typical of primary classrooms (Duke, 2000; Pappas, 1993). We thus assumed that there would not have been as much of a gap between school and home genres as the results indicated. Secondly, there is a commonly held belief that Chinese immigrant parents are concerned about correctness in writing, which might constrain children's freedom of written expression, whereas teachers encourage children to write without undue concern for correctness, which theoretically should be more liberating for children. This perception was not verified by our data. In his research on child writers, Meyer (1992) points out the effect of freedom to realize one's writing agenda on the choice of genres:

When a writer is offered, either vicariously or explicitly, many types of genres of written language to explore and given the freedom to address her writing agenda, she expands her written language repertoire... She may even invent genres or types of writing which are new to her, if not to the world of writers. (pp.19–20)

In this study, freedom was more evident in writing at home than at school. Interestingly, the teachers saw themselves as facilitators of the children's writing, providing scaffolding and prompts to help the children grow as writers, whereas the parents in this study often simply told the children to write so that they could practice their writing skills. Perhaps teachers need to balance scaffolded writing experiences with opportunities for children to choose their own topics, audiences, and purposes for writing, particularly the kinds of students discussed in this study.

The children's texts revealed their enthusiasm for writing and relatively sophisticated perception of how much written language can construct webs of meaning from their life experiences: they appeared to use writing as a heuristic for generating and organizing thoughts, something which their school writing program did not seem to promote. Other than quantity, the children's home writing went beyond the school-based texts not only in function and form but also in the way they created personal links to their social experiences in both quality and complexity, as they made sense of and responded to the various social systems of meaning in which they interacted. All in all, the children's writing, with its variety of functions and genres, reflected the strong influence of the home environment and the literacy practices documented in previous research and reflected in the notion of such writing as the "primary Discourses" discussed earlier. Also important was the contribution of school instruction, that is, the "secondary Discourses": it provided the children with exposure to and practice in the use of the written language, a repertoire of narrative and non-narrative genres, and a systematic learning of writing strategies and skills.

The study suggests that the school and home environments can work in complementary ways to help children, especially bicultural and bilingual children, acquire literacy. It was evident from the wide range of functions and genres found in the children's home writing that each child was pursuing his or her individual 'writer's agenda' (Meyer, 1992). This was manifested through their selection of theme, purpose and form to achieve a writing goal based on their response to a particular situation. These home writing experiences served to widen their sensitivity to different social and cultural situations and to open up new avenues for using writing for self expression and thinking, especially when given ownership of the writing process. Employing a rich variety of forms and functions in a non-instructional context, the children tried out various means of actualizing their personal writing agendas, assessing what they already knew, and exploring new possibilities as

they traversed their “primary Discourses.” In recognition of the value of writing activities out of school like those revealed in this study, teachers could provide opportunities for children to choose their own purposes for writing, at least some of the time, to foster children’s enthusiasm for writing and nurture L2 (or L1) literacy acquisition. Tapping into what children enjoy about writing at home, teachers can “help the children see the connections between the literacies they observe and participate in at home and what they engage in at school...expanding the two worlds” (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003, p.35). Classroom instruction, guidance, and support could be coupled with the children’s own writing agendas to promote opportunities for writing within their “zones of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) in order to enhance children’s writing development. Teachers could move away from an authoritarian role and shift their instructional orientation to a more social and personal development focus.

Previous research has stressed the importance of connecting school and home, and using children’s cultural and literacy experiences at home as resources for literacy learning (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Early & Gunderson, 1993; McCarthy & Garcia, 2005; Millard, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Xu, 1999). Teachers need to be more aware of the value of the writing opportunities and contexts children have at home and connect these to writing instruction in the classroom, particularly in the case of students who are bicultural and in the process of becoming bilingual, as these children were. For example, teachers could encourage children to write in the context of everyday home and class activities for genuine communicative purposes. This could serve to widen the range of functions and genres in their school writing. When children are given the opportunity to craft texts on a more personal basis and for more authentic purposes, they will more readily invest interest in the writing activity. Through writing about their home literacy activities, children could ‘bring their home’ into the classroom and share their diverse cultures and understandings. The conception of literacy as reasoning suggests that children learn how to use culturally appropriate ways of using language to construct meaning within multiple discourses (Gee, 1990). Developing social networks between home and school, as Moll et al, (1992) point out, can, indeed, build up “funds of knowledge” for instructional purposes.

In sum, the young ESL writers in the study were expanding their understanding of written genres. The findings suggest that children who live in two linguistic and cultural realms need to write for a range of purposes in both school and home contexts for effective literacy and language learning to occur. Writing in a second language may require considerable cognitive effort. Hence, it is essential for educators to support ESL children’s involvement in writing for a variety of purposes in different social and academic contexts. Rather than focusing school writing on the learning or practicing of specific writing skills, school writing for ESL children

needs to be directed more toward writing motive, function, and genre so that they can learn how to use the written word for “primary Discourses” (Gee, 1990). Whether explicit instruction or implicit immersion is more effective is beyond the scope of this paper, but the internalization of the communicative uses of language in different contexts and for different functions should be given greater consideration in elementary second language education.

It is important to point out that the study was limited because the writing samples collected might not portray a true picture of what the children wrote at school. The children might have written in other school contexts on a more personal basis, such as notes to their classmates. If such texts existed, they were produced outside the teacher's teaching agenda and hence were not collected. Another limitation is that the sampling period covered only part of the academic year's curriculum. A more diverse range of genres and functions might have been found when looking at the whole school year. Still, the amount and variety of writing generated by the children at home on a more or less self-initiated basis sheds further light on what ESL children are capable of when left to their own devices as developing writers.

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## Appendix A. Writing functions in home and school contexts

Context in which the functions occurred	Function	Definition
School	Practicing	To follow writing instructions or to practice general or specific writing skills
	Imagining-fiction	To create an imaginary situation which could be true but is not, with true-to-life or real characters
	Reasoning	To reflect on events or situations, to draw conclusions
Home	Enjoyment	To write for fun and to entertain oneself or others
	Ego enhancing	To illustrate competence and independence, to impress or display knowledge
	Interacting	To establish or maintain social relationships, to participate in or respond to social or cultural events
	Representing oral language	To use words to represent speech (e.g., dialogue, often embedded in “speech bubbles” in pictures.)
	Representing written language	To represent print seen in their familiar worlds, or literary texts, including familiar songs and poems
Home and school	Imagining-fantasy	To create an imaginary world where there is no limit to actions, wishes or thoughts. (Children wrote both fiction and fantasy in their school stories but only fantasy in the home context.)
	Expressing	To express opinions, attitudes and emotions
	Referring to experience	To record or report past and present experience, incidents, sequence of events, and to comment or reflect on them
	Informing Anticipating	To provide facts, information or evidence To anticipate future events or predict what might happen

## Appendix B. Genres and related functions

Context	Genre	Definition	Related Functions
School	Story	narrative — fiction and fantasy — with crisis and complication (written to a prompt)	referring to group or personal experience, imagining, expressing, practising
	Journal	record of event or description (topics suggested by teacher)	referring to group or personal experience, expressing, informing, anticipating
	List	list of answers to worksheet exercises	practicing, informing, expressing, imagining, anticipating, reasoning
Home	Story	experiential or fantasy narrative with crisis and complication	referring to personal experience, imagining, expressing
	Journal	record of real life experience	referring to experience expressing, anticipating, representing oral language
	Diary	description of real or created objects or experience; verbal descriptions of pictorial creations	expressing, informing, interacting, representing oral language
	Drawing	a visual representation with writing in speech bubbles depicted as words coming out of a person's mouth	expressing, interacting, representing oral language
	My favourite things	a list of favourite things and description of reasons for liking them	expressing, informing
	Non-fiction writing	description of factual content about things of nature with labeled pictures for illustration	informing, expressing
	Greeting card	messages to convey information, feelings or emotions	interacting, expressing, representing oral language
	Note	description of real experience, with or without salutation and closing	representing oral language, interacting, expressing, informing, ego enhancing
	Poem	verse describing things of nature, real or imaginary experience or objects with our without rhyming scheme	representing written language, expressing, enjoyment, imagining
Joke	description of animals or daily life events in riddle form	ego enhancing, enjoyment, playing with words	

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