

## Translingual Writing of a Multilingual Child In and Out of School

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Résumé de l'article

La littératie scolaire en Amérique du Nord continue de se concentrer sur les langues dominantes de la société. Le programme d'alphabetisation – en particulier au cours des premières années d'études – a pour urgence que les enfants maîtrisent rapidement les compétences émergentes en littératie dans les langues officielles, ce qui justifie l'exclusion de l'alphabetisation dans d'autres langues minoritaires que les enfants multilingues apportent à l'école. Guidée par une approche translinguistique de l'alphabetisation, cette recherche motherscholar explore comment et pourquoi un enfant multilingue a utilisé ses ressources linguistiques coréennes dans des compositions translingues à travers les scripts, les genres, les modalités et les contextes pendant les années de maternelle et de première année. L'analyse qualitative des compositions de l'enfant rapportées de l'école et complétées à la maison a révélé qu'il consolidait les relations sociales avec les autres par l'écriture de lettres et affirmait des affiliations et des identités multiculturelles dans divers genres. Il l'a fait par une harmonisation naturelle avec les différences et une orchestration laborieuse des ressources. Son engagement minimal avec l'écriture translingue à l'école par rapport aux pratiques à la maison a des implications pour les enseignants en alphabetisation et les parents d'enfants multilingues.

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## Translingual Writing of a Multilingual Child In and Out of School

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### Abstract

School literacy in North America continues to focus on society's dominant languages. Literacy curriculum — particularly during early grades — has an urgency for children to quickly master emergent literacy skills in the official languages, vindicating the exclusion of literacy in other minoritized languages that multilingual children bring to school. Guided by a translingual approach to literacy, this motherscholar research explores how and why a multilingual child utilized his Korean linguistic resources in translingual compositions across scripts, genres, modalities, and contexts during kindergarten and first-grade years. The qualitative analysis of the child's compositions brought from school and completed at home revealed that he solidified social relationships with others through letter writing and asserted multicultural affiliations and identities in various genres. He did so through natural attunement to differences and laborious orchestration of resources. His minimal engagement with translingual writing at school compared to home practices has implications for literacy teachers and parents of multilingual children.

### Résumé

La littératie scolaire en Amérique du Nord continue de se concentrer sur les langues dominantes de la société. Le programme d'alphabétisation – en particulier au cours des premières années d'études – a pour urgence que les enfants maîtrisent rapidement les compétences émergentes en littératie dans les langues officielles, ce qui justifie l'exclusion de l'alphabétisation dans d'autres langues minoritaires que les enfants multilingues apportent à l'école. Guidée par une approche translinguistique de l'alphabétisation, cette recherche motherscholar explore comment et pourquoi un enfant multilingue a utilisé ses ressources linguistiques coréennes dans des compositions translingues à travers les scripts, les genres, les modalités et les contextes pendant les années de maternelle et de première année. L'analyse qualitative des compositions de l'enfant rapportées de l'école et complétées à la maison a révélé qu'il consolidait les relations sociales avec les autres par l'écriture de lettres et affirmait des affiliations et des identités multiculturelles dans divers genres. Il l'a fait par une harmonisation naturelle avec les différences et une orchestration laborieuse des ressources. Son engagement minimal avec l'écriture translingue à l'école par rapport aux pratiques à la maison a des implications pour les enseignants en alphabétisation et les parents d'enfants multilingues.

## Translingual Writing of a Multilingual Child In and Out of School

Multilingual children engage in spontaneous, dynamic, and fluid language and emergent literacy practices in all languages that they use daily at home and in communities (García & Li, 2015). In contrast, school literacy in North America continues to exclusively focus on the society's dominant languages: English in the U.S. (Martínez-Álvarez, 2017) and English along with French in Canada (Duff & Li, 2009). Canada has a longer tradition of providing bilingual programs in French and English in schools (Duff & Li, 2009) compared to the U.S., which has developed conflicting and politicized views on bilingual education, now commonly referred to as Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs (Edelsky, 1982; García & Li, 2015; Reyes, 2012). In both contexts, other minoritized heritage languages (HL) have not been adequately supported in formal educational contexts (Cummins, 1983). Literacy curriculum, particularly during early grades, has an urgency for young children to quickly master English literacy conventions, vindicating the exclusion of literacy in other minoritized languages that they bring to school (Dyson, 2003).

Except for a small fraction of children receiving formal and informal literacy instruction simultaneously in two languages, most multilingual children do not have the opportunity to acquire literacy in the HL, in part because of the prevailing monolingual ideology in homes and larger institutions (García & Li, 2015). Not supporting multilingual children for literacy development in a unified repertoire that includes all languages is a violation of their language rights (García & Li, 2015; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002) and has consequences on the development of their full potential in socioemotional, cognitive, and academic dexterity (Bialystok, 2011).

The study presented here is nestled in the larger discourse concerning multilingual children's literacy practices. As a researcher, I am committed to challenging the perils of English-only policies in schools for multilingual children (Choi, 2018; 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b). I am equally invested in my children's language and literacy development in all languages my family uses daily at home—two non-Roman-scripted, minoritized HLs, Korean and Farsi, as well as English—in a predominantly English-only state and country, Georgia, U.S. I merge these intersecting identities in my work guided by motherscholars who “draw upon our own experiences, identities, bodies of knowledge, communities, relationships, and professional skills to support and protect the well-being of our children to the best of our abilities” (DePouw & Matias, 2016, p. 238). Transcending the personal sphere as a motherscholar (Baghban, 2014; DePouw & Matias, 2016; Kabuto, 2008; Matias, 2016), I attempt to defy the larger, pervasive monolingual practices for multilingual children who are at risk of becoming English-only by telling stories about my child who minimally engaged in writing across scripts in an English-only school, yet who elaborated in his translingual writing in a multilingual home (Choi, 2019; 2021a; Wong Fillmore, 2000).

In this paper, I examine the writing of a simultaneous trilingual child, Gyuan (pseudonym), who attended an English-only public elementary school in the U.S. I draw on my son's translingual literacy practices (Canagarajah, 2013a; Horner et al., 2011)—his engagement with writing across various scripts and modalities to address the research question, “Why and how did Gyuan, a multilingual child, utilize his Korean linguistic resources in translingual compositions in and out of school during kindergarten and first-grade years?” I begin with the theoretical framework, a translingual approach to literacy,

followed by a discussion of extant research on multilingual children's translingual writing practices in and out of school. I then discuss case study research methods that I employed as a motherscholar. Findings and discussion of his translingual writing are followed with implications for teachers and parents of multilingual children.

### **A Translingual Approach to Literacy**

In understanding my son's writing across scripts and modalities in and out of school spaces, I adopt a translingual approach to literacy that has been advanced by Horner et al. (2011) and Canagarajah (2013a; 2013b). The translingual orientation defined as "the disposition of openness...toward language and language differences" (Horner et al., 2011, p. 311) and "the synergy, treating languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings" (Canagarajah, 2013b, p. 41) has called for a *paradigm shift* in the literacy field that has been dictated by English-only and conventional norms of "standard" English. This approach illuminates multilinguals creating meaning across languages and modalities in social interactions by "drawing from the fullest range of ecological resources" (Canagarajah, 2013a, p. 13). Because of multilingual writers' daily exposure to and interaction with multiple languages, they develop what Lorimer Leonard (2013) called rhetorical attunement: "a way of acting with language that assumes linguistic multiplicity and invites the negotiation of meaning to accomplish communicative ends" (p. 163). However, Horner and Alvarez (2019) argued that multilinguals drawing on "a set of available tools or resources for achieving so-called transparent or effective communication" is not automatic or easy (p. 2). Instead, we should acknowledge "the labour entailed in making meaning from any and all utterances" (p. 11).

The current study where I make sense of a multilingual child's emergent biliteracy (Gort, 2019) contributes to the existing scholarship on translingual writing that has largely been limited to studies of older multilinguals (Canagarajah, 2013b; Horner et al., 2011; Lorimer Leonard, 2014). In the subsequent sections, I review growing, pertinent studies that have employed the translingual view in comprehending multilingual children's compositions completed in and out of school contexts.

### **Multilingual Children's Translingual Literacy Practices in Schools**

Growing research has examined how and why multilingual children in early grades engage in translingual literacy practices across available languages and modalities in DLI or English-medium classes (Durán, 2016; Edelsky, 1982; 1989; Gort, 2012; Kenner, 2004; Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Machado & Hartman, 2019; Martínez-Álvarez, 2017; Zapata & Laman, 2016). Edelsky (1989) conducted a yearlong study of first through third graders in Arizona where the children were supported to write either in Spanish or English. The findings showed that despite earlier resistance to engage in translingual writing, the children provided translations of both terms as a "means for indicating emphasis" in their writing (p. 172). More recently, multilingual children writing in the conventions of African American Language or a simple Arabic sentence as opposed to English to express love for their mothers on a Mother's Day card in an English-medium class are clear examples of the multilingual children's acute sense of audience, multilingual identity, and a desire to bond with their family members through translingual writing (Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Zapata &

Laman, 2016). When translingual writing as an accepted form of expression was modelled in Machado and Hartman's (2019) study on a general classroom teacher's poetry unit, second graders from diverse linguistic backgrounds transliterated HL words and inserted easier, memorized words from HL scripts in their poems. The children also drew on their continued exposure to multilingual environmental print, which is part of "the landscape of their [young children's] everyday lives" (Dyson, 2003, p. 330).

Studies have also found that different modalities other than languages, such as children's drawings, are an important part of children's translingual writing through which they reinterpret lived experiences and social worlds as well as assert identities (Dressler, 2014; Ghiso, 2016; Machado & Hartman, 2019). For example, Machado and Hartman (2019) illustrated a Chinese child's inclusion of the yin and yang symbol in her translingual poem as an important component of translingual text that she created to express her Chinese identity. Similarly, children enrolled in a German-English DLI program expressed their identities by drawing the countries' flags in which the national languages are spoken. Another study conducted in a DLI setting illuminated Latinx first graders' translingual writing that reflected their multilingual and multicultural identities and lived experiences as manifested in their drawings and photographs around laundromats ubiquitously found in their local community (Ghiso, 2016).

### **Literacy Practices in Multilingual Homes**

Researchers have paid attention to how children from immigrant backgrounds engage in family language and literacy practices (Soto Huerta & Riojas-Cortez, 2014; Yang et al., 2021), particularly translingual writing across multiple language communities, such as Spanish (Alvarez, 2017; Reese & Goldenberg, 2006), Japanese (Danjo, 2021; Hashimoto & Lee, 2011), Mandarin (Zhao & Flewitt, 2020), and Korean (Choi & Cho, 2019; Kwon, 2020a; 2020b; Song, 2016). Despite the primary focus on bilingual children's language and literacy practices at home, research-based in Canada has highlighted trilingual children's acquisition and navigation of two official scripts in French and English, as well as a minoritized HL — Mandarin (Riches & Curdt-Christiansen, 2010), Korean (Kim, 2016), and other languages such as Vietnamese, Polish, and Spanish (Dagenais & Day, 1998). These studies conducted in Canada collectively reveal that the immigrant families were invested in the children's trilingual education, and the children seemed to successfully become emergent trilinguals and triliterates. Nevertheless, HL and literacy development still were not part of the school curriculum, consequently adding more strain on the parents and limiting the children's potential as trilinguals. Immigrant parents' efforts to develop their children's HL and literacy at home are exemplified in Zhao and Flewitt's (2020) examination of an eight-year-old boy's interaction with distant, extended family members and friends of his mother through social media in a Chinese and Portuguese family in England. The study shows the boy's proficient use of the written Mandarin and English scripts, as well as varied modes, such as audio and emojis, to meet various social functions in the digital, transnational space.

As seen in Zhao and Flewitt's (2020) study, it is not just parents that facilitate the children's HL language and literacy development but also multiple family members, including extended family members, such as grandparents (Soto Huerta & Riojas-Cortez, 2014), and siblings (Choi, 2022b; Cho, 2018; Kabuto, 2014), as well as the local

community (Alvarez, 2017). Despite committed families' efforts to transmit and help develop children's HL and literacy, it is a daunting task to foster HL literacy in children as opposed to oracy development (Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Otwinowska et al., 2021). Children could be more easily socialized into speaking and listening by interacting with the parent in the HL. However, when HL literacy is not integrated into children's schooling in a larger society, literacy development requires an intentional sit-down time with their children in the caregivers' busy life (Okita, 2001). In addition, community HL schools where literacy instruction is provided are not accessible to all immigrant parents (Hashimoto & Lee, 2011). Even with the support from HL schools, parents lack resources for HL literacy at home (Liang & Shin, 2021) and may experience that instruction at the HL schools does not promote children's engagement with HL literacy (Li, 2006).

### **Children's Translingual Practices in Korean-Speaking Immigrant Families**

Growing research studies have examined Korean bilingual children's engagement with translingual writing at home, often supported by their immigrant Korean mothers who were committed to their children's biliteracy development (Choi & Cho, 2019; Kwon, 2020a; 2020b; Song, 2016). The children were found to depict their local and transnational experiences as well as identities in their writing across Korean and English (Choi & Cho, 2019; Kwon, 2020b; Song, 2016). However, despite much support from immigrant mothers who also sent their children to the community-based HL school, the dominant language ideology prevalent in schools and society was so overpowering that the children did not consider Korean language and literacy beyond things associated with their mothers (Kwon, 2020a; Song, 2016). The findings suggest that HL literacy will continue to stay at the family level if it is not incorporated into formal learning at school.

### **Children's Translingual Practices from Motherscholars**

Whereas the aforementioned studies examined multilingual children's literacy practices in others' homes, motherscholars have long studied their own children's language practices in the HL and literacy (e.g., Bauer, 2001; Kabuto, 2014; Wang, 2011; 2016). However, most motherscholar research has focused on multilingual children's engagement with reading events in the HLs with the help of supportive parents (Bauer, 2001; Bauer & Montero, 2001; Kabuto, 2010; Wang, 2016). More pertinent to the current study, emerging research has examined young children's voluntary, emergent writing practices across available scripts (Choi, 2021a; Kabuto, 2014). For instance, Kabuto (2014) examined her school-age daughter and her preschool son's writing events across Japanese, English, and drawings for a two-year period in her home. The findings revealed how the texts the siblings co-created and the dialogues around them signified their fluid and natural navigation of different modes as well as the bilingual socialization process. Choi's (2021a) study of a child, who was developing emergent writing skills in all three distinctively different scripts—Korean, Farsi, and English—from age three to six highlighted the child's making linkages between the scripts and name-writing practices in all three as a way of stamping his trilingual identity.

Despite these advancements, translingual writing of multilingual children, especially across two contexts, in and out of school, has not been an exclusive focus of the

inquiry. More translingual writing research that grants emphasis to the work of multilingual writers and the intentional choices they make in their writing across audiences, genres, time, and spaces will benefit the field.

## **The Study**

### **Case Study from the Vantage Point of a Motherscholar**

In addressing the question, “Why and how did Gyuan, a multilingual child, utilize his Korean linguistic resources in translingual compositions in and out of school during kindergarten and first-grade years?” I employed a case study, which frames an individual’s experiences within larger social contexts (Yin, 2014).

I utilized this method from the vantage point of a motherscholar whose research involving her children lends much deeper insights into study phenomena because of “its intensity and its comprehensiveness for data collection,” and “the core process of intimate, unexpected encounters between children and print” (Baghban, 2014, p. 149; DePouw & Matias, 2016; Kabuto, 2008; Layayese, 2012; Matias, 2016; Rust, 2016). Similarly, I had the advantage of longitudinal, intimate engagement with my child that allowed me to extensively document his literacy practices that have evolved over time and to piece together his work more holistically.

At the same time, however, I struggled with issues concerning ethics and my positionality in studying my child. For instance, Gyuan was observed talking proudly to his friend about how his mother was writing about his work. Despite this, I wondered if he might not feel comfortable with part of the data at later times in his life (Long & Long, 2014). I have tried to mitigate these challenges by attempting to collect his written work in less intrusive ways (Bauer, 2000) and to keep detailed observation notes at a later time after my interactions with him as opposed to recording interactions right at the moment (Wang, 2008). Importantly, I have exercised reflexivity throughout the research process by critically noting when my “agenda” as a researcher was overpowering my intersecting role as a parent and accordingly modifying “paths of investigation” (Glesne, 1999; Kabuto, 2008, p. 184). For instance, with my zeal for documenting my child’s becoming multilingual and -literate as a researcher, I initially videoed and audio-recorded all the literacy practices occurring in our daily lives. However, realizing that I was excessively recording all the interactions, which were disruptive to our life, I stopped the recordings and started to make observation notes afterwards when I was alone. Other ways in which I applied reflexivity included informally asking Gyuan about his intentions for his compositions and paying special attention to “silences... utterances, gestures, and expressions” (Long & Long, 2014, p. 135), as well as consulting a peer debriefer. Although I do not claim to “get it right” (Long & Long, 2014, p. 135), these procedures helped to challenge my assumptions about my child’s written work.

### **Context: Multilingual Home and the School**

The case study of a multilingual child took place in a household where we use the two HLs and English daily. We live in a more multi-ethnic, -cultural, and -lingual suburban area of Georgia, U.S. Three adults in the house — paternal grandmother, a monolingual in

Farsi, father, a multilingual in Farsi, English, and Turkish, and me, a multilingual in Korean, English, and Farsi — have kept one parent and one language policy for the most part since his birth. That is, Gyuan’s father and grandmother speak Farsi to him, whereas I speak Korean to him. Gyuan replies in the corresponding HL to the three caregivers, and the dominant language he uses with his younger sibling is mostly Korean. While he used to separate the languages before his schooling years, with more exposure to English in school, around the end of first grade, he started to use more English in his talk with family members, including his sister and the parents. Literacy has been richly embedded in our daily activities from the beginning, exemplified by books in all three languages read to him almost daily.

He attended English-only preschools for approximately 8 months sporadically since he was two and a half years old, and he began attending the same elementary school since prekindergarten (PreK), at four and a half years old. Gyuan also spent every summer month in his maternal grandmother’s apartment in South Korea (hereafter Korea) where he attended a Korean preschool for some summers. Around kindergarten, he started attending Farsi and Korean HL schools on the weekend where he mostly learned about the culture and how to read and write the alphabet.

With approximately 30% Asians, more than 50% White, and 20% other races in the elementary school according to the district website, he made close friends with various culturally and linguistically diverse peers over the last three years. Although the school often touted the diverse student body, it operated under the English-only mandates, supported by my conversations with other parents as well as informal observations that I made as a parent. For instance, language classes other than English were not offered to students, and the direct communications that I received from his teachers were English-only. Gyuan has been identified as an English language learner since kindergarten, and the same teacher, an English monolingual, pulled him out for 45 minutes every day for English Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) instruction.

### **The Child and the Motherscholar**

Gyuan, an inquisitive, talkative, and creative boy, became orally proficient almost equally in all three languages, and he could read and write in all three somewhat independently by the end of first grade. He had reported to me that English is the “easiest” and Farsi the “hardest.” He also has an interest in other languages and likes spending time with extended family members. He can easily become engrossed in any type of story presented in the form of books, audiobooks, or TV. He enjoys pretend plays with his sister and loves creating, drawing, and building anything. Currently, he seems to find math and art the most enjoyable subjects in school and does not seem to find reading and writing fun. Although his first grade and ESOL teacher described him as needing frequent reminders and redirection to make him concentrate on schoolwork, he seemed to be motivated to do good work at school.

Having grown up as a Korean monolingual, I became a subsequent multilingual with varying proficiency in the three languages. I speak Farsi with my mother-in-law, English and Farsi with my partner, and Korean with my children. My children’s ability to speak and write in Korean is essential to my psychological stability as they would be the only ones with whom I, an immigrant living in a multilingual household, might converse in



my mother tongue daily (De Houwer, 2020; Okita, 2001). I volunteer to read bilingual books to their classes and often remind them of hidden multilingualism in the linguistic repertoires of their English-dominant peers. I also encourage them to read and write in all the languages they know without trying to push them hard with my own “agenda” for them to become trilinguals and trilitrates (Kabuto, 2008). These personal efforts with my children intersect with my professional identity as a professor and researcher of multilingual and literacy education for children from immigrant backgrounds.

### **Data Sources**

In this paper, I focused on Gyuan’s compositions completed during kindergarten and first-grade years, from age five and a half to seven and a half, when he began receiving (in)formal literacy instruction in three scripts across different contexts—English-only elementary school, Farsi and Korean HL schools—as well as a tri-lingual and -literate home. Employing ethnographic data collection methods (Simon & Dippo, 1986), I examined approximately 130 compositions that he brought from his elementary school including his ESOL class as well as 520 compositions completed at home for the two years. I did not include any writing brought from the HL schools into the analysis as most focused on written drills of the alphabet. However, I analyzed the diary homework assigned weekly by the Korean HL school. Although I frequently remind him of the assignment, Gyuan completed the drawing and writing in Korean by himself. Moreover, whereas most compositions brought from school were done in English except for only four compositions in Korean, approximately 45% of the compositions completed at home included Korean scripts. In addition to the writing data, observation was an important part of the data. In order not to disrupt the flow of daily interactions, I took retrospective observation notes when I was alone. Approximately 80 entries during this time period were collected on a Word document, every, or every other, week. The observation notes included my thoughts about Gyuan’s language practices and his responses to my questions regarding his compositions.

Although scribbles, letter strings, and name-writing practices in three scripts are valuable compositions that show his emergent, translanguaging writing, I excluded them from the current paper as they were a focus in a previous study (Choi, 2021a). In addition, one of the HLs was not part of the current study as he engaged only in emergent literacies in Farsi at home, and none of the schoolwork during this study period included writing in Farsi.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, for both drawings and texts with written scripts, I viewed and read each of the 650 compositions that were saved as image files to look for common patterns in his meaning creations (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). After inductive coding of the data, I developed a coding scheme by employing a content analysis method (Ball & Smith, 1992) and organized the themes in a matrix in Word. The coding scheme included the following criteria: (1) context of the composition concerning where it was completed (e.g., at home or school); (2) topic (e.g., expression of love for mom); (3) genre (e.g., diary or reading worksheet); (4) purpose (e.g., to please mom, to express his interests, to persuade, and to express emotions); (5) targeted audience (e.g., self, teacher, or mother),

and (6) mode (e.g., English, Korean, or drawing). For instance, I initially coded Gyuan's letter in Korean completed at school as letter writing (genre), expressing love to mom (purpose), and writing in Korean full sentences (mode) at school (context). For compositions that included drawings, I followed guidelines of multimodal analysis where I paid special attention to the meaning of the symbols, shapes, and their arrangements in each (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). In determining the purpose of the text, I directly asked Gyuan about his intentions, and I also relied on my judgement based on my intimate understanding of him as a parent. It was necessary to use both approaches as he sometimes did not specify his reasons for the text creation. Although my assumptions cannot be proven, my intimate knowledge of him as a parent helped me draw conclusions. Moreover, in some places, double coding was inevitable, especially in the mode criterion. While some of Gyuan's texts included all the modes, Korean and English as well as drawings, other texts included only one mode.

Upon coding each of the compositions in this manner, I reorganized the codes under one criterion: the "purpose" of his compositions both at home and school to better explain the "why" in the research question. The two most frequent reasons for his compositions across scripts, contexts, and modalities were to solidify social relations with others and to assert multicultural affiliations and multilingual identities. While initial codes, such as to please mom, to apologize, and to show friendship to a peer were consolidated into the former, the latter encompassed initial codes, such as to show love for Korean Air, to recollect his stay in Korea, and to explain his knowledge about various airplanes. Moreover, the "how" in the research question was addressed by examining the mode in combination with other criteria. For instance, the mode in which the text was written, such as English, Korean, and/or drawing was juxtaposed against the purpose and target audience to holistically understand how Gyuan engaged in the designing and composing process.

In the subsequent sections, I present the findings for the two overarching themes in each context to answer why he engaged in translingual writing. How he did so is embedded in the presentation of the findings.

## Findings

In this section, I respond to the question, "Why and how did Gyuan, a multilingual child, utilize his Korean linguistic resources in translingual compositions in and out of school during kindergarten and first-grade years?" Gyuan seemed to have solidified social relationships with others through letter writing and asserted multicultural affiliations and identities in various genres and modalities through natural attunement to differences and his orchestration of resources (Canagarajah, 2013a; Horner & Alvarez, 2019; Lorimer Leonard, 2013). I discuss the texts that Gyuan completed in the home and school contexts, focusing on the different functions and purposes that these translingual compositions fulfilled.

## Solidifying Social Relationships with Others through Letter Writing

### *At Home*

Gyuan engaged in letter writing to express his emotions and to solidify social relationships with others in English and Korean at home. I often observed him voluntarily writing letters in English sentences with developmental spelling to his loved ones. Approximately midpoint through first grade, he wrote a five-sentence letter to his class and teacher. Composed during a family trip, his letter started with “class I miss you” and ended with “I had a good time in Orlando [Orlando] but I had a lot of fun with you.” To his bilingual peer around the same time, he also wrote a birthday card in English first followed by the translated version in Korean.

Other than a few times he wrote letters in English to his sister and me, he mostly wrote apology, love, and birthday letters in developmental spelling in Korean to his Korean-speaking family members. He often wrote one-sentence letters expressing his love for me such as “엄마 사랑해” (Mom, I love you) or reporting a corrected behaviour in the form of a written apology. For instance, approximately seven months into first grade, I scolded him for not doing his work for the Farsi HL school. Shortly after, he quietly handed me a sticky note that read, “엄마 이란 숙제 했어요” (Mom, I completed the Iranian homework). He also wrote letters exclusively in Korean to his grandmother on a piece of paper or using text on my mobile phone. For instance, on Lunar New Year’s day, six months into first grade, he voluntarily wrote a letter to her: “할머니 새 봄 마니 바다요. 사랑해요.” (Grandmother, I wish you a lot of fortune in New Year. Love you) (Figure 1). In this letter, he drew her apartment building with him and his grandmother from the eighth-floor looking down on a playground, which is a precise depiction of her residence in Korea.

**Figure 1**

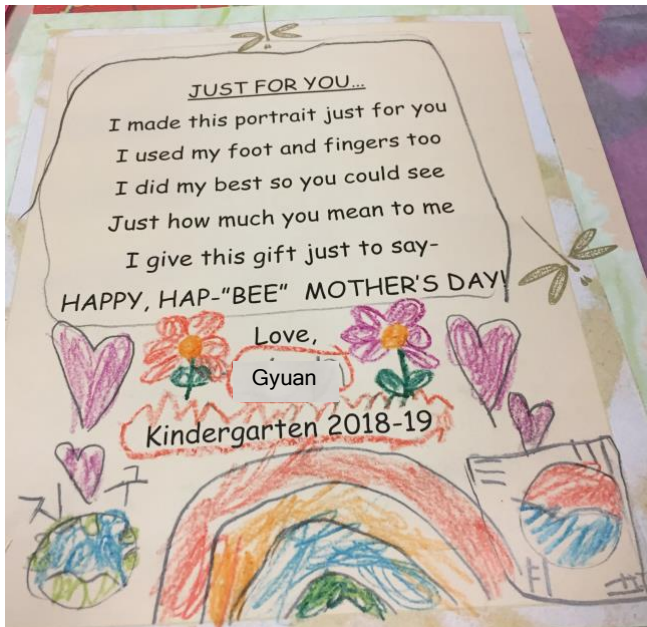


### *In School*

Letter writing was one of the genres that Gyuan seemed to have explicitly learned at school as he brought in several thank-you letters that he had written to community workers and famous political leaders in the U.S. during the two grades. Yet, it remains unanswered whether or not the letters were sent to the real audience by the teacher in order to help Gyuan see the social function of this letter writing. It could be that the purpose of these letter-writing practices was merely to teach him the conventions of letter-writing in English and the genre itself. Nevertheless, some letter writing completed at school did include a real audience when he was invited to write for a parent: a Mother's Day card toward the end of kindergarten and a Christmas card about halfway through first grade. In these instances, he engaged in translingual writing in the letter intended for me.

Below his signature in English, "Gyuan," he decorated a pre-written Mother's Day card in English by drawing and colouring two objects, the earth and the Korean flag, non-random symbols that have connections to his mother's birthplace, on each side below the written words (Figure 2). He labelled the earth by writing conventionally in Korean "지구" instead of in English. He might have done so because he did not know how to write it in English and he found the two-syllable word that he had memorized easier to write compared to English.

**Figure 2**



About eight months later, he brought home from his first-grade class a Christmas card in full sentences — mostly in Korean — with only one drawing of a simple heart. He excitedly and proudly reported to me that he took upon an invitation from his teacher who had explicitly told the class to write a letter in any language to their parents. The letter asking for my undivided love for him, one not shared with his sister included his signature in English, "Love Gyuan" with most of the text written in Korean, "엄마 사랑해요. 엄마

남만 사랑해조요. 엄마해개. 엄마안태주는 선물 하나. 엄마 내 선물 좋아하지요. 엄마 진짜 사랑해요. Love, Gyuan” (Mom, I love you. Mom, please love me only. A present for mom. Mom, you like my present, right? Mom, I love you really. Love, Gyuan).

His letter-writing practices at home and school illustrated above show his acute sense of audience as he chose a particular script for a corresponding addressee. Although the instruction he received at school is not part of the study, the teacher’s assignments seem to welcome multilingualism through letters to family, as seen in his first-grade teacher’s invitation for it. In addition, he learned to write letters in English to English-speaking audiences (e.g., community workers) and in Korean to Korean-speaking family members through the guidance provided in both settings. His deliberate choice of the most apt script to deliver the intended meaning to a corresponding addressee regardless of context can be interpreted as his having developed rhetorical attunement (Lorimer Leonard, 2013) and that languages are synergistic for him rather than separate in meaning construction (Canagarajah, 2013b).

### Asserting Multicultural Affiliations and Multilingual Identities in Various Genres and Modalities

#### *At Home*

In addition to his solidifying social relationships with others through letter writing, he often drew and wrote about his cultural affiliations at home. Similar to the example of the Korean flag inserted in the Mother’s Day card, the drawings of flags and airplanes that represent both Korea and the U.S. frequently appeared in his home compositions, signifying his multicultural identity. For instance, a few days after arriving in Korea, upon completing kindergarten, he drew American and Korean flags and signed his name in Farsi, English, and Korean vertically from top to bottom in the middle of a paper. On top of it, he stapled two, one-third-sized flipbook pages, each of which included a drawing of Korean Air on the left, apparently representing Korea, and on the right showing Delta, representing U.S. (Figure 3 (a) and (b)). As he just arrived in Korea with Korean Air, he could have been inspired by his most recent experience when creating the flipbook.

**Figure 3**



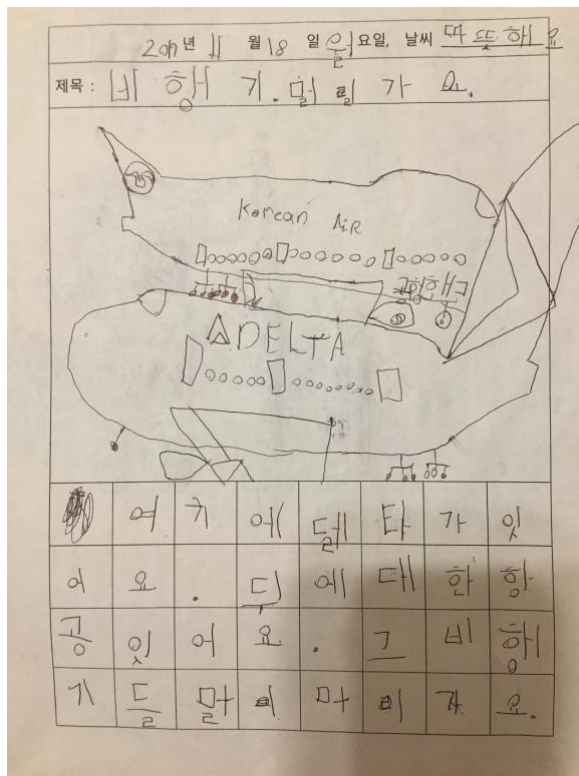
Figure 3(a)



Figure 3(b)

Nevertheless, the cultural emblems were not a singular occurrence. A few months before going to Korea, he was seen creating a scoring sheet with these two flags on a cardboard box for a game that he invented at home. He not only often created a multi-page book without words about the airplanes but also frequently wrote about them in his Korean diary as homework for the Korean HL school. For example, around four months into first grade, he wrote to describe Delta and Korean Air, travelling to Korea in his diary assignment (Figure 4): “여기에 델타가있어요. 뒤에 대한항공있어요. 그비행기들멀이머리가요” (Here is Delta. Behind it is Korean Air. These airplanes go far away). Although he wrote the diary entirely in Korean, he labelled his drawings of airplanes in English. He labelled the Korean Air in Korean, “대한항공,” in an opposite directionality at the bottom of the airplane and also in English.

**Figure 4**



It also is not a coincidence that the first book that he created in Korean at the end of first grade was about a fictional boy returning from Korea to Georgia with Korean Air (Figure 5(a), (b), and (c)). In fact, this 20-page mini-book was inspired by his favourite Korean picture book about a boy travelling via Korean Air.



Figure 5

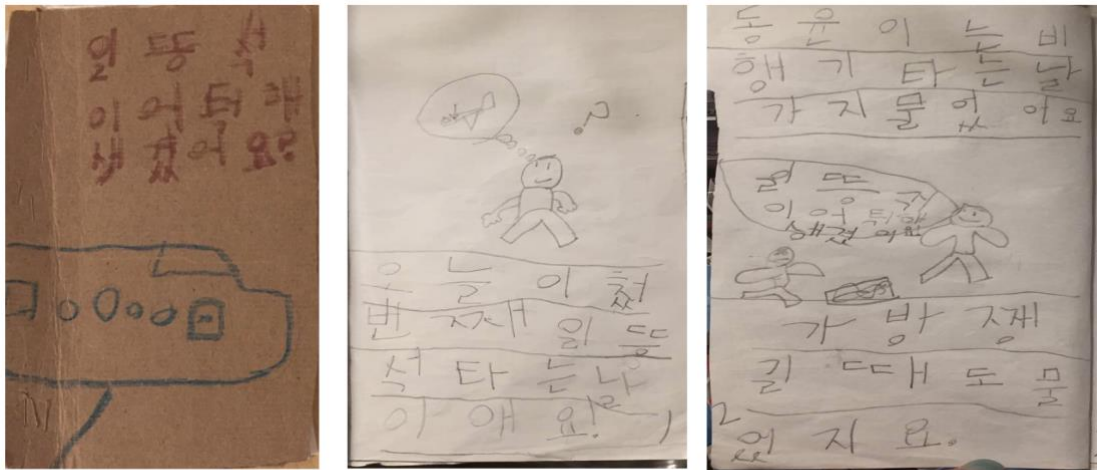


Figure 5(a)

Figure 5(b)

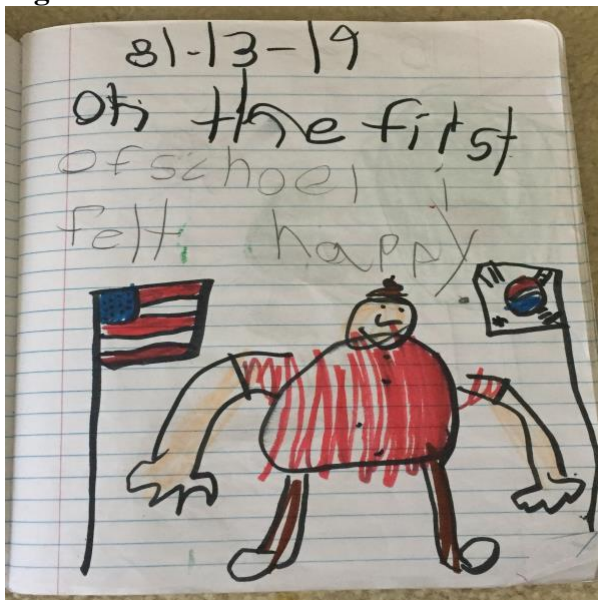
Figure 5(c)

We can see that to create this text genre, he pulled from various ecological resources, such as his knowledge of the Korean script, his own experience travelling to Korea from Georgia, and his understanding that writing the first Korean book would make his mother happy (Canagarajah, 2013a).

### *In School*

Flags and airplanes that signified his multicultural affiliations were often seen in his compositions in school as well. On the first page of his first-grade notebook, he drew Korean and American flags with his portrait in the middle, which was accompanied by his writing in English, “on the first day of school, I felt happy” (Figure 6).

Figure 6



About three months later, his cover page of the three-page book about airplanes featured an elaborate, coloured drawing of a Korean Air airplane with three distinctive yin and yang emblems, also found in the Korean flag. By using invented spelling, he labelled “Koryin [sic] Air” in big print in English in the middle as well as its translation, “대한항공 (대한항공)” in Korean, in small print at the bottom left of the airplane, similar to how he labelled it in the Korean homework at home (Figure 7(a), 7(b); the Korean text is enlarged and highlighted in Figure 7(b)). Given the rest of the book was written entirely in English, the beginning of which read, “the first I am going to teach about is Koryin [sic] Air then the Delta...” (Figure 7(c)), he could have easily inserted only the English label for Korean Air. However, he inserted the bilingual label for the airplane in this informational text, a different genre from letter writing.

**Figure 7**

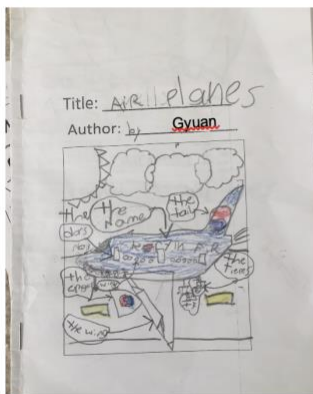


Figure 7(a)

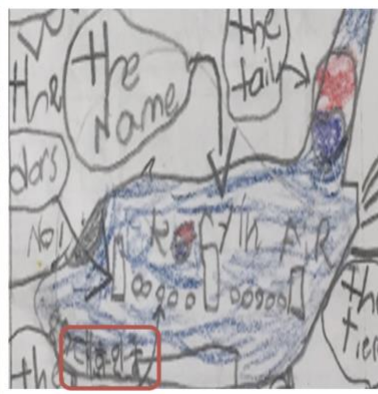


Figure 7(b)

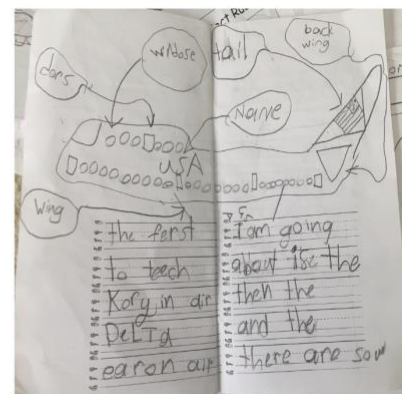


Figure 7(c)

Not all the texts Gyuan created in the home and school that included drawings of airplanes and flags representing his cultural identity demonstrate translingual writing. He tended to predominantly use the English script in school and Korean script at home, complying with the language expectations in each context. For example, the mini-book created at home included only the Korean script to impress his mother, who always encourages him to engage in writing in the HL. Likewise, his self-portrait completed in school included only drawings and the English script.

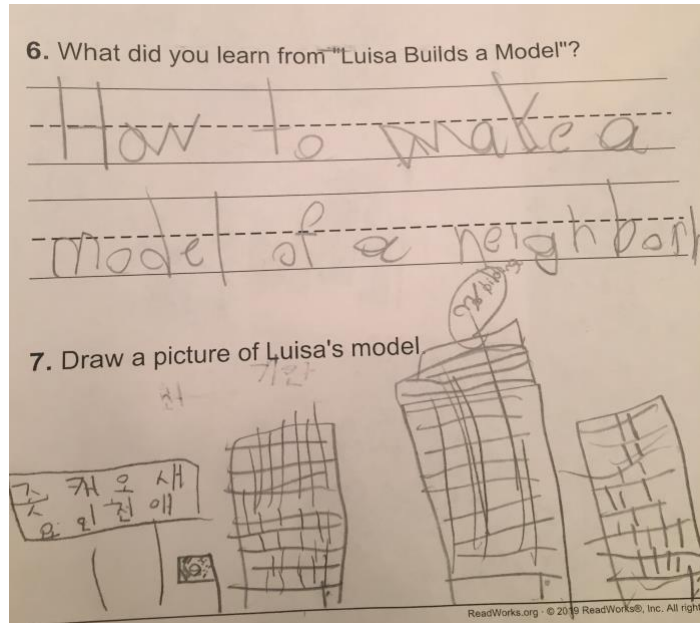
However, there were small, yet important instances of translingual writing in his texts. The flipbook created at home, which included mostly drawings, included his use of all three scripts as he signed his name in English, Korean, and Farsi. His diary mostly written in Korean also included bilingual labels in the drawing. The airplane book completed in the school was primarily written in English but included a bilingual label in Korean and English on the cover page on the drawing of the airplane.

Another cultural affiliation that he expressed in his school writing other than flags and airplanes was apartment buildings in his grandmother’s city, Incheon, in Korea. The similar apartment building that he drew in the Lunar New Year’s greetings card for his grandmother described in Figure 1 also appeared in an ESOL reading worksheet he brought home during first grade (Figure 8). In response to a reading passage about a girl named Luisa building a model of her typical suburban American neighbourhood, Gyuan wrote



short answers entirely in English to the subsequent comprehension questions. He also inserted a Korean sentence into his illustrations to the last question in the worksheet, “draw a picture of Luisa’s model.” Instead of portraying Luisa’s model exactly as described in the reading passage, he drew three tall apartment buildings with the middle, tallest one labelled as “my building” in English suggesting his strong ties to Korea. On the left of the buildings, he drew a small Korean flag facing the left, with conspicuous signage that read in Korean, “춣 캐오 새요 인천애 ( 좋게 오세요. 인천애; come warmly to Incheon).”

**Figure 8**



His pictorial response would have reflected an inaccurate understanding of the reading passage in English, although his written responses up until this point were correct. Nevertheless, the text in Korean, which means “please come to Incheon happily” suggests that he not only understood the passage correctly, but he also extended its meaning by luring people to come and visit the city. Promoting and advertising the neighbourhood was not part of the original passage. In addition, similar to his writing from short, memorized words from the ubiquitous HL environment print, such as Korean Air, a similar version of this sentence could have been a common expression he might have heard and seen repeatedly during his visits to Korea. Furthermore, inserting Korean could have been his way of livening up an otherwise decontextualized reading worksheet. This interpretation can be supported by the fact that I observed him playfully inserting English letters into Korean writing worksheets and Korean letters into Farsi worksheets as a way of expressing his discontent with the disengaging HL assignments at home. Although this social function of writing as resistance against disengaging writing assignments is noteworthy (Choi, 2022a), it is not the scope of the current paper.

Gyuan seemed willing and able to utilize translingual and multimodal resources in his short book about vehicles and ESOL worksheet, and his English writing reflected his multicultural affiliations. He managed to do so even when he was not explicitly invited to

write in a language other than English at school. It could be interpreted that Gyuan seemed to be thriving across multiple languages, literacies, and settings despite attending a school that primarily privileges English. Nevertheless, he engaged with translingual writing rarely at school (i.e., only four times in both grades), compared to the amount of writing he was doing in Korean at home. More importantly, without explicit and continued support from school, his willingness to do so may dwindle over time.

### Discussion

The findings of Gyuan's translingual practices in and out of school contexts highlighted how his exceptional rhetorical attunement, as well as a positive association with his multi-cultural and lingual-ism, motivated him to engage in translingual writing in both spaces. His keen sense of audience, desire to please family members, positive connections to Korea, and sensitivity to linguistic differences, as well as the support he received for translingual literacy at home, facilitated his translingual writing at home and school despite being practiced minimally in the latter.

#### **Translingual Writing across Scripts and Genres in and out of School: Rhetorical Attunement and Labor**

Translingual writing of a multilingual child in and out of school illustrates that multilingual children, not just multilingual adults, do “consciously tune themselves toward language dynamism” in writing (Lorimer Leonard, 2014, p. 243). This *rhetorical attunement*, “honed by their discursive navigation of difference” (p. 243), is something that multilingual children naturally develop through their continuous exposure to different languages and constant negotiation of meaning in daily communication and interaction. For instance, Gyuan's letter writing, expressing his desire to bond with others at home, exhibited his acute awareness of the audience as seen in his writing in the language that accommodates the expectations and linguistic repertoires of his readers. This common practice—multilingual children writing with a clear sense of audience—has been similarly reported in a few existing studies but has not been interpreted through a translingual lens highlighting multilingual children's *rhetorical attunement* (Choi, 2021a; Durán, 2016; Edelsky, 1982; 1989; Kabuto, 2008; Kenner, 2004; Kwon, 2020a; Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Reyes, 2012; Zapata & Laman, 2016).

In addition, Gyuan associating HL and literacy with his mother is congruent with existing research findings (Danjo, 2021; Kwon, 2020a; Song, 2016). However, his translingual compositions were not limited to personal letters or only one genre that readily invokes direct personal connections, such as poetry writing (Machado & Hartman, 2019) or compositions around photographs taken around homes and communities (Ghiso, 2016; Martínez-Álvarez, 2017). His engagement with different text types and genres (i.e., writing informational books and a reading worksheet) expanded our understanding of why and how multilingual children might engage in translingual writing beyond personal narratives.

Another telling example of rhetorical attunement is his translingual writing in which he asserted his multicultural affiliations and identities despite the flow of his languages being obstructed in the school that predominantly privileged English over other HLs. Even when he was not officially invited to embed his “ecological resources,” he

managed to translingually write across scripts and modalities (Canagarajah, 2013a). He wrote using simple, memorized words and phrases as labels in Korean, a total of only four times over two school years (Horner et al., 2011). His positive association with Korea as represented in Korean symbols, such as flags, airplanes, and apartment buildings, motivated him to engage in translingual writing across spaces even when English was predominantly mandated in school (Machado & Hartman, 2019). In addition, he instantaneously and eagerly accepted his first-grade teacher's invitation to write in any language. Previous studies have repeatedly found that children would not easily accept this kind of one-time offer unless this is routinely built into the curriculum due partly to their swift socialization into monolingual practices in school (Edelsky, 1982; Machado & Hartman, 2019).

This domain-specific arrangement where one language was emphasized in one context facilitated Gyuan's translingual writing as there was greater support and emphasis on HL and literacy at home in tandem with a little validation of HLs from his school. However, research shows that children's interest in and motivation for HL and literacy diminishes rather quickly unless the larger institutions fully embrace multilingualism (García & Li, 2015). The sustainability of his translingual practices is not guaranteed over time with sparing encouragement from his school teachers. Gyuan's advantage in socio-economic status would not be available to other immigrant families who therefore cannot support their children's HL and literacy at home. Most multilingual children would be relegated to monolingual English-only education, which takes away the opportunity for them to grow to their full potential as multi-linguals and -literate.

Furthermore, his "natural" attunement to optimizing his meaning-making by drawing on all his Korean and English should not be considered an automatic, easy process (Edelsky, 1989). Instead, his translingual writing is a product of his labour through which he assiduously orchestrated complex "ecological resources" that were available to him (Canagarajah, 2013a): his proficiency in the languages, lived experiences across borders, cultural emblems embedded in his life, as well as careful consideration of apt language for a particular audience, a text genre, and a context in which the text-making occurred (Horner & Alvarez, 2019). For instance, while writing mostly in English to meet the expectations of in-school writing, we can speculate that he made a point of slipping in the Korean word, *대한항공* (daehan hanggong; Korean Air) as a "means for indicating emphasis" within his text (Edelsky, 1989, p. 172). He could have easily constructed the text entirely in English, but the Korean label for Korean Air carried much significance to his life and identity that he included the Korean word for himself, regardless of whether his audience, mainly his teacher, would understand it or not. Although he was capable of writing more in Korean in the school text based on compositions he produced at home during the same period, he inconspicuously wrote in simple, short words, supposedly following the code of school literacy. In addition, despite his personal attachment to Korean Air, he presented the information about it in a rather detached, factual manner in both texts, reflecting his level of receptivity to different genres.

### **Drawings of Multilingual Children: An Invitation for Translingual Writing**

The findings also call attention to the essential intersections between multilingual and multimodal practices as tools for amplifying the voices and lived experiences of

language-minoritized young writers. It was the drawings that facilitated him to engage in translingual writing in an English-only school space as seen in the examples of Gyuan's in-school translingual writing through the use of shorter, memorized words (i.e., "the earth" and "Korean Air") and one-sentence signage (i.e., "welcome to Incheon"). The items that he included in his drawings were not random objects simply expressing his interests. Rather, his choice of symbols and their arrangements in a text seemed to be a result of a deliberate design process. By representing "metaphoric arrangements" from his multicultural environment, he reinterpreted his social worlds and asserted his multicultural, multilingual identities (Dyson, 2003; Kress, 1997, p. 97). His own illustrations that represent Korea, the earth positioned next to the Korean flag and Korean Air as well as his grandmother's apartment gave him purpose and urged him to add a written description in Korean to the significant emblems that represent his identities.

Without the drawings, he would not have voluntarily attempted to write in the HL script at school, especially given that his teachers to my knowledge did not encourage children to use languages other than English except for the one time and that he was not confident of his literacy skills in the HL. This finding points to the fact that we should not think lightly about multilingual children's drawings that enable them to engage in translingual writing in an English literacy-only school environment, augmenting the need for the literacy field to move beyond a language-focused analysis in understanding children's translingual writing (Dressler, 2014; Machado & Hartman, 2019; Zapata et al., 2018).

### Implications

While more DLI programs that likely offer translingual writing opportunities in minority languages need to be in place for multilingual children, curriculum writers and teachers need to embrace an orientation in multilingualism in their practice. In order for students like Gyuan to continue to thrive across languages and settings, schools need to make concerted efforts to embed multilingualism into the curriculum more consistently. In particular, literacy teachers need to be open to the instability that students' translingual writing might present to them and be willing to negotiate meaning as readers, which involves labour on their part (Canagarajah, 2013b; Horner & Alvarez, 2019). This expanded outlook could incorporate mentor texts to demonstrate specific examples of translingual writing in published books in the curriculum (Machado & Hartman, 2019; Zapata & Laman, 2016). Moreover, writing activities where children write for their family members in any language they desire, such as Family Message Journals (Durán, 2016) could motivate children to engage in translingual writing in school. In addition, given Gyuan's motivation to engage in translingual writing to affirm his multicultural and -lingual identities, teachers should deliver literacy instruction in an identity-affirming manner (Cummins et al., 2017). Teachers could encourage students to create "identity texts" (Cummins & Early, 2011) through photography and collages of their lives (e.g., Ghiso, 2016; Martínez-Alvarez, 2017). In creating identity texts in translingual writing across various genres, multilingual children should not be permitted to use only written scripts across languages but also to use multiple modalities (Kenner, 2004; Machado & Hartman, 2019; Zapata et al., 2018).

The findings also have implications for parents. Gyuan's exposure to Korean culture through a close familial relationship, attending Korean HL school, and immersive travels to Korea collectively facilitated his willingness to engage in translingual writing in both contexts. Parents should provide authentic opportunities for their children to engage with literacy in the HL as much as possible. Parents could involve their children in authentic writing activities, such as letter writing in any capacity that they can (i.e., in drawings, a word, or sentences) on paper or in text messages to real audiences who primarily use the HL. However, to avoid limiting HL literacy "only to a specific, discrete, assigned social sphere," motherhood or family (Horner et al., 2011, p. 306; Kwon, 2020a), parents could try to align literacy practices in the HL to those at school (Wang, 2011). Nevertheless, parents know their own children the best. Parents can decide when, how, and to what extent they can work on the HL literacy based on the traits, interests, and tendencies of the children as well as by involving them in decision-making (Wang, 2011).

### Conclusions

Together with other studies on children's translingual writing (Choi & Cho, 2019; Machado & Hartman, 2019; Zapata & Laman, 2016), this motherscholar research disrupts traditional notions of literacy and literacy instruction by urging literacy teachers and scholars to create room for translingual writing for multilingual children whereby "the innovative and creative abilities of individuals to move back and forth among a variety of language resources" are nurtured rather than being suppressed (Alvarez, 2017, p. 9). Not recognizing and further incorporating these home and community-based literacy practices in which multilingual children write creatively and effectively with a clear sense of audience to communicate their messages by drawing on all available resources is an opportunity missed to optimize school learning for multilingual children (Martínez, 2010). Admittedly, Gyuan was privileged with extraordinary support for multilingualism and literacy in all languages at home and as a result of his access to HL schools in a highly diverse geographic area, which would be different from most multilingual children growing up in the U.S. However, similar to other children, the only language in which he received formal instruction was English. What happens to an increasingly large number of multilingual children who are not nurtured to further develop their foundational knowledge in multilingual environmental print when their teachers at school and caretakers at home cannot support translingual writing? Incorporating only one of the several languages children use daily constrains them from fully expressing themselves in writing, which impedes the development of multilingual identity and literacy (García & Li, 2015; Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Martínez-Álvarez, 2017).

The study is limited as it is a study of a single child, making it difficult to understand this educational practice in broader terms. However, one child's translingual writing across scripts, genres, and modalities in and out of school contexts discussed in more depth through an intimate motherscholar framework (Kabuto, 2008) could be an important addition to the field. Furthermore, given that I would never be able to speak accurately about my son's writing on his behalf (Long & Long, 2014), more systematic measures by having a co-researcher, beyond what I had, could have strengthened my interpretations, especially about why he engaged in translingual writing (e.g., DePouw & Matias, 2016; Kennedy & Romo, 2013). Lastly, the findings related to the in-school

writing could have been more enriching if I had access to all of his schoolwork, as well as the literacy curriculum and the teachers' direct perspectives.

More studies that further theorize multilingual children's *rhetorical attunement* and *labour* in their translingual writing processes will expand the field (Horner & Alvarez, 2019; Lorimer Leonard, 2013; 2014). Specifically, future studies should examine multilingual children's translingual writing more in and out of school contexts and follow through on how these multilingual children are supported to sustain and further develop biliteracy. Furthermore, exploring more affordances of translingual writing in varied genres, such as academic registers, could merit the field. Lastly, motherscholar research is collaborative and critically reflexive, adding to my attempts to advocate for other multilingual children like my own (Baghban, 2014) and to encourage multilingualism within the family in hopes of it spreading to the school system and society at large, could be an important contribution to the field.

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