Introduction

The focus of this paper is the investigation of young children’s creative approaches to verbal, visual and written communications. Throughout the paper we raise a number of questions about invented languages used by some young second language learners and about drawing as a form of sign creation used by emergent writers. Using examples from two recent studies, we demonstrate how children use inventive ways of communication long before they learn the conventional codes required by a culture. The two studies were conducted independent of one another and were qualitative in nature. The writers came together to write about findings from the studies conducted independently. The first study focused on the invention of temporary languages by young second language learners. The second investigated children’s drawings (with, for example, pencils and crayons) as a form of sign creation or visual text construction and as an important element of the written language learning journey. The symbolic values central to the events are explored in relation to the concept of semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1962) and Bernstein’s code theory (1971). We begin with a short discussion of signs before exploring signs as semiotic tools.

What are signs?

According to Kress (1997), a sign is ‘a combination of meaning and form’. Kress also suggests that ‘language is a system of signs; images are organised as a system of signs; clothing is a system of signs’ (1997, p. 6). These systems of signs provide the basis of internalisation, a high mental functioning, and are essentially related to knowledge construction, and the sustainability and reproduction of cultures. Sign use refers to the ability to use the conventional forms, codes and rules associated with a particular type of sign, for example spoken and written English. The term semiotic comes from the Greek word ‘semeion’, meaning sign. As such, semiotics is the study of the meaning of systems of sign and is understood to include all sorts of conventional signs and symbols used by a particular culture.

Signs as semiotic tools

Vygotsky’s contribution to ‘sign creation’ and ‘sign use’ is based on his concept of semiotic mediation, a perspective in which human activities take place in sociocultural contexts and are mediated by communications involving the production and interpretation of signs (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky understood semiotic mediation as the most fundamental form of human activity which can ‘mediate
Mediated action is predicated on the Vygotskian notion that intentional human actions are mediated by signs. In the triangle, Vygotsky amalgamated signs, learning objects and the learner into a semiotic form of activity and described mediation as an internalised cognitive action, moving something from the external world to an internal realm. For this reason, learning through semiotics ‘does not simply stand for or mediate an individual’s relation to the world, rather they enable the individual to turn upon himself/herself to mediate himself/herself’ (Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis, 2007, p. 216). This also suggests that ‘individuals are not passive participants waiting for the environment to instigate meaning-making processes for themselves, but, through their interactions, individuals make meaning of the world while they modify and create activities that trigger transformations of artefacts, tools, and people in the environment’ (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 16).

The view that signs are internally oriented processes and individuals are active learners, suggests that signs are not ready-to-use tools, rather they are the products of mediated actions because people invent or create temporary or new signs as a result of their experiences with existing signs (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). One can think of the linking of spoken and written language into a new and broader semiotic system as an example of sign creation or use (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). According to John-Steiner and Mahn, learning entails change and semiotic systems are united through the change process into new combinations and complexities.

**Figure 1. Semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1978/1933)**

1. When there is a great deal of shared and taken-for-granted knowledge of speakers, typical ways of speaking are through a restricted code. Within this code, speakers use a few words but draw on shared understandings. This type of code creates a sense of includedness, a feeling of ‘insider’ in a group.

2. Language exchanges, that lack a shared or taken-for-granted knowledge, are organised to include detailed information and thorough explanations because there is no prior or shared understanding and knowledge.

From such a view, spoken language proceeds as an attempt to uncover forms of social relations or quality of social structure (Bernstein, 1971). In Bernstein’s own words, ‘forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationship with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance’ (p. 76). More recently, Littlejohn (2002) proposed that ‘people learn their place in the world by virtue of the language codes they employ’ (p. 178).

The primary focus of language code is on the development of social identity. In asserting a connection between code and language, Bernstein (1971) gives the view that what is spoken is largely dependent on the architecture of principles which regulate how language is used, thereby symbolising speakers’ social identities. As a set of social ‘constraints’, language codes therefore, provide ‘regulative principles which select and integrate relevant meanings, forms of their realizations and their evoking contexts’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). In this way, codes become external regulators which influence the behaviours and cognitive processes of speakers.

However, language codes are not a set of rules and tools but the totality of resources for the use of languages and they are resourced differently by different people, ‘realizing different distributions of power and principles of control’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). Bernstein viewed spoken language as both meaning making and the construction of the social and psychological worlds of individuals:

> … when a child speaks he voluntarily produces changes in his field of stimuli and his subsequent behaviour is modified by the nature of these changes (Bernstein, 2003, p. 58).

Bernstein’s interest in language code lies in defining how an individual intentionally goes beyond the language to create relational changes. His explanation of how people carry out the process of producing, creating and generating desirable outcomes for themselves includes the role of rules, resources and principles of languages which, for him, is contextually determined (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999). The predisposition to perceive language in a contextually determined way legitimates connections between language and identities so that language, with the support language code, becomes

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**Codes as regulative principles**

As characterised by Bernstein (1971), ways in which people communicate verbally are governed by the following two code features:
the tool that shapes the way in which individuals obtain their identities and social relationships. Bernstein linked the function of language to the use of language code in people’s development in their social environments. According to Bernstein and Solomon (1999), ‘underlying the construction of identity is the issue of how variations in the distribution of power and variations in the principles of control impose or enable variations in the formation of identities and their change, through differential specialization of communication and of its social base’ (p. 271).

Language invention and use by young second language learners

Common to theories of second language acquisition for young children is a strong appreciation of the importance of play (Philp, Oliver & Alison, 2008; Strid, Heimann & Tjus, 2013). Children tend to view a new language as a tool rather than a system of codes and rules to learn. Their first language makes significant influences on young children’s communication attitudes and abilities towards the learning and use of another.

Selective use between their first and second languages by second language learners has gained prominence as a research interest in the area of second language discourses (Ledesma & Morris, 2005). This phenomenon is linguistically termed code switching, which, according to Jorgenson (2003), is a behaviour closely associated with language choice patterns. There is a large group of researchers who understand language alteration and mixing as a strategic form of communication (Nilep, 2006; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2013), believing that young children know how language functions in communication situations and they can manipulate the language in a wide range of communication contexts.

According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2008), selective use of languages can happen when speakers want to fulfil their desire for linguistic creativity through verbal interactions. Communication using two languages represents the flexibility inherent in languages themselves. Although languages usually function as separate linguistic systems, they can become a joint device for a creative style of communication. As Bhatia and Ritchie have commented, ‘the cooperation … and coexistence of the bilingual’s two languages make a bilingual a very complex and colourful individual’ (p. 10).

Goldin-Meadow (2005) states that certain properties of languages are resilient, and presents a view that language can be accessed as a reproducible and creatable means. Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998) reported second language young children’s invention of a language that resembled either of the two languages, for her this is ‘an invented language’ (p. 168). Krupa-Kwiatkowski proposed that although children understood that their invented language did not make sense to others, they used it to cope with the new learning situation, as well as to gain personal pleasure. If we know that young second language learners have developed certain cognitive capacities from their home language, it is easy to understand that they approach the learning situation equipped with skills and strategies. Communicative interactions ‘involve strategic planning and complex semiotic choices even among 3-year-olds’ (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998, p. 138). The presence of needs or drives triggers the strategic and planned endeavours to creativity. A very important need for them is to establish a sense of belonging and identity. Umberto (2010) takes the view that ‘language creation does not occur in a linguistic vacuum; language creation often builds on previous experiences; language creation is the product of identity alignment in a multilingual context’ (p. 616).

The language invention case (Study 1)

Context

The study discussed here was part of a larger project investigating the learning experiences of eight Chinese immigrant children in five early childhood centres in New Zealand (Guo, 2010; Guo & Dalli, 2012). It was qualitative in nature with field work carried out through five full-day observations of each child. Two boys, Jim and Luke, were chosen for the current study because they were in the beginning of learning English. Jim was three years and one month and Luke was three years and three months. They were both born to Chinese immigrant parents in New Zealand. The children spoke Chinese fluently in their homes. At the time of the study, Jim had been at the centre for 23 days and Luke for two months. During the observations, special attention was paid to their spoken languages, the situations in which they spoke, the people involved and their body language. With data, we used Vygotsky’s semiotic mediation and Bernstein’s language code as the frameworks that were established through specifying how, why and where the children mediated the semiotic signs and created their communications. Spoken language, as we see it, is about making meaning and constructing identities and relationships (Bernstein, 1971; Vygotsky, 1962), and for these two children who knew almost no English, we identified examples that illustrated how they communicated in an English-speaking environment in order to establish an identity, live in the environment and relate to others. Analysis of the data involved the question of how verbal communications that the children created helped them deal with the environment, construct identities and form interpersonal relationships.

The following examples were identified from the data. They each gave evidence about the children’s creation of spoken languages and about them mediating the semiotics.
Luke’s example

In the morning, Luke, all the other children and his teachers are inside. The children and teachers are all working on some activities. Luke stands by the entrance door, watching outside.

Luke opens the door and steps outside. His teacher Nicole sees this and calls: ‘No, Luke’.

Luke stops at the door, turns to Nicole, watching her for 39 seconds. Luke then shouts: ‘waameihai …’

Nicole watches Luke but gives no response.

Luke comes back to the room.

Discussion

This is an example of invented language by Luke in response to his teacher Nicole. Clearly, Luke was not using a language but making sounds. Carefully examining the sounds he made, we could see that they resembled the Chinese words ‘wo hai mei’ [I do not yet]. Apparently, Luke intended to use the Chinese word ‘I do not want’, which suggests that, at that point, he wanted to challenge Nicole through the language that he could use. He did not use the correct Chinese language, possibly because Luke knew that Nicole did not understand Chinese, so it would not matter how he said that. There was no question about his ability to speak ‘I do not yet’ in Chinese, as Luke spoke Chinese fluently and ‘I don’t yet’ was a daily phrase. For this reason, it was unlikely that Luke was learning the phrase in Chinese. Probably, Luke started to assert himself in the Chinese language but then he changed his mind thus modifying the language. Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998) tells us that, beneath the surface of second language, children’s invention of a new language is their attempt to gain pleasure from playing with the language. It is therefore possible that Luke was taking delight in inventing a phrase.

Luke could have also known the position of his teachers to regulate his behaviours, and the consequences he would face if he challenged them; therefore, instead of running away, Luke used an interesting technique of resistance that made sense to no-one except possibly to himself. At first glance, this might appear to be a second-language-speaking child verbally teasing his teacher, but when analysing it further, one can see that this inventive strategy may not be limited to an utterance of sounds; it might have served as an instrument of autonomy too. Nevertheless, given that Luke reverted to compliance by turning the initial resisting phrase into an invented sound, for that part, Luke was likely to have revealed a perception concerning the importance of teacher instructions. It seems that Luke invented a phrase to help him overcome his initial urge to resist his teacher’s instruction. Here the language served as a mediating tool that assisted Luke to regulate his behaviour.

Jim’s example

This is about the lunch time. A routine ‘tidy up’ song starts that reminds children of cleaning the room. Children move from their play activities to tidy up the room. Jim quickly leaves his blocks on the floor and jumps to the music.

He goes to the door, shouting to the children outside: ‘tadaadptai …’, at the top of his voice. Jim continued making these sounds as he was helping tidy up.

Discussion

More than simply playing, it seems that Jim picked up the phonetic features of the words ‘tidy up’ because his sounds bore a clear resemblance to them. This suggests that he had paid attention to the phonetic units of the words and was reproducing them (Goldin-Meadow, 2005). Underpinning the creation of this utterance, thus, was Jim’s endeavour to use the language.

Jim appeared to have understood the meaning of ‘tidy up’, and that what he did was the result of his interpretation and reproduction of this language sign. Analysis of the excerpt revealed how Jim incorporated a mediated action into his utterance, creating semiotics to facilitate his own involvement in the tidy-up experiences. The situation where Jim was found determined the language invention observed during the event. Jim’s understanding of the tidy-up ritual provided a framework for his creative capabilities, with him drawing on the sounds of the song. This indicates how meaning making was connected with Jim’s creation of an interesting semiotic in the environment (Vygotsky, 1962). We also regard Jim’s language invention as having a ‘regulating’ role in his behaviour. Bernstein (1971) referred to spoken language as carrying intentions. In view that Jim engaged himself in the tidy-up activities when he was making the sounds, his behaviours and speech might be mutually mediated. In this way, the sounds were not simple sounds but products of regulative language principles or symbolic control.

Drawing and writing: Sign creation and sign use

According to Vygostky (1997) children must discover that speech (like objects or things) can be ‘drawn’ or ‘written down’. Learning to write using culturally determined codes and rules is a complex process that takes time and effort. Kellogg (2008) likened learning how to compose an effective extended text to learning how to play a musical instrument or chess, requiring considerable time, support and practice.

The act of composing begins with directly representative media, including play and drawing (Dyson, 1988; 1990) with children spontaneously shifting between moving, singing, making sounds and mark-making (Wright, 2003). Young children comfortably ‘shift meanings across multiple modes.
long before they have mastered formal writing skills’ (Mills, 2011, p. 56). For example, talk and drawing often interact as parallel and mutually transformative processes (Cox, 2005). Strong inter-relationships between early writing and drawing have been identified by researchers from the 1980s and 1990s (Caldwell & Moore, 1991; Calkins, 1986; DuCharme, 1991; Dyson, 1988, 1990; Kress, 1997; Norris, Mokhtari & Carla, 1998; Oken-Wright, 1998). These findings have been supported by more recent research (see for example, Mackenzie, 2011; Dyson, 1988; 1990; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Jalongo, 2007; Kress & Bezemor, 2009; Mills, 2011; Ring, 2006; Shagoury, 2009).

Drawing gives children the potential for rich expression and complex learning (Oken-Wright, 1998) long before they are able to express themselves with conventional written language forms. Caldwell and Moore (1991) argue that drawing is a flexible, invented, personal symbol or sign system and as such it is unconstrained and does not require learned interpretation. Therefore, a drawing is an example of a ‘created sign’. This is in direct contrast to writing systems, which are determined by cultural context, constrained by codes, conventions and rules and therefore require learned interpretation. To write using the codes, rules and conventions of a particular culture, is to ‘use sign’. In the case about to be discussed we share the journey of one child, CJ, as he discovers how he can compose messages and make meaning in ways that leave marks behind. We track his journey as he demonstrates his ability to be a ‘sign creator’ and begins to explore ‘sign use’. CJ’s writing journey comes from a qualitative study which focused on children’s emergent writing experiences with particular attention paid to the relationship between talking, drawing and emergent writing. Data were gathered from children, early childhood educators and parents in preschools and schools over a six-year period.

The drawing as sign creation case (Study 2)

Context

The study was conducted over a period of six years. It was part of a large project ‘Becoming a Writer’ that focused on children’s writing experience in the first year of formal schooling with particular attention paid to the relationship between talking, drawing and early writing (Mackenzie, 2011; Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie & Hemmings, 2014). Data was gathered from children, early childhood educators and parents in preschools and schools. CJ was attending preschool two days per week throughout the data collection period, although the samples shared here were collected by his mother at home. CJ started showing interest in drawing and ‘writing’ when he was three years and six months old. In the following series of samples his growth from sign creation to sign use is illustrated across the 18 months prior to enrolment in school. Throughout this time he had no formal instruction in the written code.

Discussion

Throughout the year prior to starting school, CJ demonstrated his interest in sign creation and sign use. He had noticed people as they wrote and wanted to replicate these behaviours. His fascination with paper and pens was encouraged and rewarded with interest from those around him. The figures show his early interest in drawing and writing as he explored ways of making meaning. His understanding of what constituted writing changed throughout the year although his interest in drawing continued. While he developed more understanding of the conventional written code he also developed more detail in his drawings which is particularly evident in Figure 7. By the end of 2012 he knew that writing had to be presented in a particular form to be read by others. He explored the code in his own way and own time and came to this conclusion without formal instruction.

Signs and codes in early childhood education: Reflections and implications

While the examples presented were minimal due to the limitations of this paper, they give insights into understanding how the children developed approaches to communication that involved the creation and use of semiotic signs. The self-invented semiotic signs of Luke and Jim are an example of the creative effects of language on children’s learning experiences, and of children’s ability to express themselves in a creative way. Jim and Luke uttered words that were neither Chinese nor English. They appeared to have produced an ‘invented language’ (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998, p. 168). The children did not depend on others to provide them with an identity, but engaged in a strategy that helped them to act as a member of a new language and cultural community. By taking unique ways to exert autonomy, regulate social behaviour and to enjoy learning, the children contributed creatively to their own development as a member of the group.

In the case of CJ, he worked independently to explore the concept of mark-making through drawing, writing-like behaviours and finally conventional use of the written code. However, his drawing was not replaced by writing. At times the chosen mode was drawing, at others text and still others a combination of the two. He happily applied both of these new modes of communication in parallel with his existing modes of talk, gesture and play.

What we find particularly interesting about these studies is the way the children created and used semiotic signs. The two young second language learners were born into sociocultural settings that were different from those of their early childhood centres.
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<th>Figures</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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| Figure 1. July 2011  
CJ was fascinated with paper and pens. He was three and a half at this stage and particularly liked drawing on small pieces of coloured paper. He was interested in sea creatures and attached meaning to the shapes he created. If you look closely you will see a fish on the top left and some squid. |
| Figure 2. October 2011  
CJ is now just four and still fascinated with sea creatures. His drawings are often accompanied by a narrative although not necessarily for anyone but himself. He proudly shares his drawings and is rewarded with encouragement to continue to draw. He is provided with appropriate tools for drawing. He was also interested in making sea creatures at this stage and filled his room with creatures made from craft materials (cardboard, coloured paper etc.), which his mum hung across his room. |
| Figure 3. December 2011  
This example (one of many created at the same time) marked a shift to 'writing'. CJ understood that writing was a particular way of communicating. In this example he wrote his Santa wish list. As he wrote he recited the things he wanted Santa to provide. He was very confident that his message would be understood by Santa. He was four years and two months. |
| Figure 4. May 2012  
By this stage CJ has started writing his name and using the letters from his name to add text to his drawings. He is still fascinated with sea creatures and in this picture he has created an underwater sea creature zoo. Beside the creatures are labels. What may be mistaken as early writing at the top of the page are waves indicating that the zoo is underwater. He is visiting the zoo (see drawing of self on top left). He is four years and eight months. |
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<th>Figure 5. June 2012</th>
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<td>The interest in underwater zoos and sea creatures was evident in many drawings at this time. Some included more writing than others. This one was chosen to show the detail in the drawings which to CJ were just as powerful as words. In one instance CJ created a recipe for broccoli soup (see Mackenzie, 2014, Fig 7.1, p. 92) explaining the amount of text to his mother—‘it’s a recipe and they need lots of words’.</td>
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<th>Figure 6. August 2011</th>
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<td>This is the only example that was created at preschool—in response to a request to draw his house. A close examination shows the fireplace with chimney, mum and younger brother inside, the road on the right hand side, flowers and two figures who are climbing up to the roof (CJ and Dad). Dad often rescues balls from the roof.</td>
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<th>Figure 7. November 2012</th>
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<td>In this example CJ has drawn a bee and dragonflies that he has noticed in the garden. His eye for detail is quite apparent. He has not felt it necessary to add any text although he gave a verbal explanation for the creatures he had drawn. He is five years and one month.</td>
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<th>Figure 8. December 2012</th>
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<td>In this example CJ shows that he has developed an understanding that text needs to be represented using a particular code. He now understands the need for a code that Santa can read. In this example he asked for help from his mum to spell the words because it was important to get it right. This was a very important letter to Santa. In the year prior to starting school he has developed a sophisticated understanding of the difference between sign creation and sign use.</td>
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The specific features of the children’s speech and those related behaviours show that the children had many extraordinary mediating abilities and connected social and individual functioning through the use and creation of semiotic signs, such as sounds, words and songs (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The analysis of Luke’s language provides further evidence of the value of the home cultural signs, and possibly home language codes to influence his production of semiotic signs in a different sociocultural setting.

For CJ, an important factor was the availability of appropriate tools, writing demonstrations and opportunities for co-construction with more knowledgeable others who valued an emergent writer’s early explorations of drawing and writing. As Clay (2001) has suggested ‘[w]e cannot assume that children will construct the sources of knowledge about the arbitrary written code entirely alone but that co-construction occurs in interaction with more knowledgeable others’ (p. 102).

At a theoretical level, the most distinctive feature of semiotic mediation is that it is a purposeful cognitive activity (Vygotsky, 1962). The attainment of sign creation and use is central to human learning. In the case of the studies discussed here, the children used the semiotic means at their disposal (languages and drawing) to develop their identities. The signs they created became important mediators, and when supported by the codes, influenced the ways in which the children expressed their ideas (Bernstein, 1971). These were typical examples of individual-acting-with-mediational means (Wertsch, 1991).

The purpose of the current studies was to move beyond cognitive questions to focus on children’s creative communications. Thinking about these findings from an educational perspective provided an avenue for expanding understandings about how communication in the early years might be conceived, particularly with second language learners and early school writers. In doing so, the study positioned teachers’ practice as important and relevant. In seeking to understand children’s creative expressions, Bernstein’s (1971) notion of codes as regulative principles is considered useful in providing a framework to explore the ways in which children’s previous experiences and the practices of early childhood centres and schools interact to shape the children’s early engagements with a new language code.

If we assume that Luke and Jim invented their own languages to generate certain behaviours in their social groups, we could say that the languages did not ‘simply stand for or mediate an individual’s relation to the world, rather they enable[d] the individual to turn up himself to mediate himself’ (Zittoun et al., 2007, p. 216). In the case of CJ, he was motivated to explore the world of written language in creative ways (drawing) and culturally established ways (writing) within his home context and without formal instruction. We demonstrate through these studies the complex nature of cultural signs, and the resourcefulness of young children to create and use cultural signs to suit their developing needs.

The research also leads us to be curious about what underpinned the codes that the children invented to guide their language creation. We could not understand their language unless we had a clear idea of their codes. Particularly illuminating were the ‘communication strategies’ that Luke used in his attempts to challenge his teacher. Apparently, Luke spoke a self-invented language. The language had particular communicative meanings to him. The nature of the ‘challenge’ that Luke created showed a sophisticated understanding of how to apply language codes to help him ‘realize different distributions of power and principles of control’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). Likewise, CJ’s early attempts at writing and many of his drawings were only partially able to be interpreted by an unassisted ‘reader’. They required his narratives or explanations to allow the reader comprehensive access to his messages.

The children in the second language learning study were learning their places and developing their identities in their early childhood settings. While CJ was attending preschool, most of his personal exploration of the written code and mark-making occurred at home. In considering the ways in which early childhood environments might foster the learning and use of semiotic signs of young children, it is important to understand how teachers and parents facilitate children’s development of semiotic mediation. The conceptualisation of semiotic mediation of children in these studies provides two suggestions. The first addresses questions regarding the motivation for semiotic mediation. Vygotsky suggests that in order to make meaning of their world, individuals mediate social and individual functioning. Teachers need to discover what children do and how children position themselves in the sociocultural contexts of the learning setting. This requires teachers’ careful observations of children’s behaviours. The second suggestion involves a move away from viewing second language learning and emergent writing as static sets of abilities to a more dynamic interpretation. Second language development and emergent writing alike should be conceptualised as creative processes in which children are active in reading sociocultural cues, exploring their positions and accessing cultural signs and codes across contexts.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have presented evidence from the literature to support the idea that people communicate and make meaning through the use of the signs, codes and rules of their community and its language/s. We have also demonstrated, through the examples provided, how children may create or invent their own unique, sometimes temporary systems of meaning making, when they haven’t yet mastered the conventional language systems of their
sociocultural context. Young language learners’ invention of their own languages and creative use of drawing as a form of sign creation are symbolic expressions of their intent to generate and reinforce desired social and cultural situations of learning. Having argued that individuals mediate social and individual functioning in order to make meaning of their world, we suggest that second language learning and emergent writing require dynamic interpretation, as they can no longer be viewed as static sets of abilities to be learned in traditional ways.

References


