

Am I Bilingual or Not?: University Students' Perceptions of Bilingualism

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Abstract: The word “bilingual” is used differently in different contexts, yet no single agreed-upon definition of it is found in the literature. Some argue that a narrow definition that bilinguals possess native-like proficiency in two languages (Bloomfield, 1933) excludes a majority of advanced second language (L2) users and they therefore adopt a more flexible view of bilingualism (Grosjean, 2013). To explore laypeople’s perceptions of bilingualism, this paper reports on a small study that investigated whether highly competent university students regard themselves as bilinguals and what criteria they use to distinguish bilinguals from monolinguals. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, most participants were found to be caught up in the strict definition of bilingualism where they considered being equally fluent in both languages as a prerequisite, while one participant, Taro, critically questioned the myth that native speakers (NSs) are perfect users of a language and aimed at developing his English communication skills rather than trying to become a NS of English.

Keywords: *bilingualism, multilingualism, identity*

1. Introduction

Although the word “bilingual” is widely used in different disciplines, for example, in the media, education, and politics, it has no clear-cut, unanimous definition (Sia & Dewaele, 2006). Laypeople appear to use the term to refer to those who speak more than one language, but the loose definition raises several questions: How proficient should people be to be regarded as bilinguals? Is proficiency the only factor that distinguishes bilinguals from monolinguals? If not, what are the other factors to be considered? In this small project, I investigated eight intermediate and advanced English learners’ perceptions of bilinguals with particular focus on three of them, who are considered to be bilinguals. Pedagogical implications are also discussed briefly at the end of this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Bilingualism

In the literature, a wide range of definitions for the term “bilingual” can be found. In the strictest sense, bilinguals are defined as individuals who possess “native-like control of

two languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 56). However, there exist some problems in defining bilingualism solely based on proficiency. First, it has been demonstrated that a vast majority of bilinguals are dominant bilinguals, not balanced bilinguals that are equally fluent in both languages (Grosjean, 2013). Such a narrow definition as Bloomfield’s excludes the majority from being categorized as bilinguals (Butler, 2013). Second, “native-like control” is also difficult to define, and can be an unrealistic goal or demotivating for late learners who start learning the second language after puberty. In addition, the proficiency-based definition does not consider the complementary principle of bilingualism that people acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains (Grosjean, 2013).

With such criticisms raised recently, we have seen a trend to move away from definitions that emphasize the native-like qualities of bilinguals; more and more researchers use broader definitions of bilingualism (Sia & Dewaele, 2006). For instance, bilingualism is defined as “the use of two or more languages in everyday life” by Grosjean (2013, p. 5). Grosjean’s definition embraces both proficiency and use because the use of languages presupposes proficiency in the languages. He emphasizes that the level of fluency depends on the need for the languages.

The fact that there are many definitions of bilingualism is not necessarily problematic. Admitting the existence of many of them, Hoffman (1991) stated that “[a] researcher is able to choose the one that best suits her or his purpose” (p. 18). Therefore, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different definitions of bilingualism and adopt one that is most appropriate for ones’ own project.

2.2. Laypeople’s Perceptions of Bilingualism

One area of bilingualism that has not been fully explored is how laypeople perceive themselves. In studies on bilingualism, participants are normally not researchers but ordinary people, and hence it is empirically important to understand laypeople’s views of bilingualism. This gap is explicitly addressed in Sia and Dewaele (2006). The researchers conducted a survey study to investigate whether self-categorization as a bilingual was related to sociobiological factors (e.g., age, gender, and education level) and linguistic factors (e.g., self-rated proficiency, years of exposure, and method of instruction). Participants were 45 individuals who fitted somewhere between the end points of a continuum of monolingual and bilingual. One interesting finding was that there was variability in self-rated L2 proficiency with a range from 5 to 10 (10 was the maximum) on a 10-point scale among 20 individuals who self-categorized themselves as bilinguals. This indicated that some participants might not regard L2 proficiency as the only criterion for bilingualism. Moreover, several differences between self-categorized bilinguals and non-bilinguals were reported. One of them was that bilinguals tended not to be active learners. In other words, those who were still studying their L2s appeared to be aware of their limitation in the L2s through feedback and test results they received, and therefore they might have felt “it would be premature to claim their status of bilingual” (p. 15). From the linguistic perspective, the difference between the two groups was the most significant

in speaking and listening, followed by pragmatic competence, and the smallest in reading and writing. Despite a methodological limitation of this study that both independent and dependent variables were elicited from the self-reported survey, it provided insights into how laypeople's perceptions of bilingualism were linked to sociobiological and linguistic factors.

Another study worth reviewing here is Pavlenko (2003). Adopting critical pedagogy and imagined communities as theoretical frameworks, she investigated how pre-service and in-service English teachers enrolled in a TESOL program perceived their status in the imagined professional communities and how critical praxis allowed them to open up an alternative option which deviated from the dichotomy of native-speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS). The analysis showed that at first, the students recognized only two options from which to choose: NS or NNS community. Those who failed to join NS community and regarded themselves as NNS expressed their embarrassment, frustration, desperation, and torment in their reflection papers. However, as the teachers gained knowledge of contemporary theories of bilingualism including the unstable nature of first and second language acquisition, particularly Cook's (1999) concept of multicompetence, they were able to imagine their status in multilingual/L2 user community. As shown in the title "I never knew I was a bilingual", critical praxis allowed the teachers to be liberated from the traditional dichotomy and see themselves as competent, bilingual, and multilingual speakers.

2.3. Rationale for the Project

As stated earlier, little research has been conducted on laypeople's views of bilingualism. Many people seem to believe that being a bilingual requires "native-like" command in two languages (Butler, 2013), yet such a narrow definition might force the majority of those who are highly competent but not native speakers of more than one language to label themselves as NNSs, which might cause negative emotions such as frustration and disappointment demonstrated by some participants in Pavlenko (2003). Thus the aim of this study is to investigate how university students who are highly competent in English and taking an advanced course define the concept of bilingual, what criteria they use to categorize themselves as bilinguals or non-bilinguals, and finally whether or not they feel frustrated or perplexed by the definition they adopt.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this project were eight university students (3 males & 5 females) I taught in two advanced courses (Courses A & B) at a private university in the Kanto area. Table 1 below summarizes their background information including their pseudonyms, school year, age, and their short-term (less than 1 year) and long-term (more than 1 year) experiences of living or studying abroad.

Table 1. Background information of eight participants

Class	Name	Gender	Year	Age	Experience of living or studying abroad	
					Less than 1 year	Longer than 1 year
A	Kana	f	2	19	No	No
A	Ryo	m	2	19	Yes (1 month)	2 years (0-2 years old) in the USA
A	Taro	m	3	21	No	No
B	Nana	f	1	19	Yes (10 days)	1 year (16-17 years old) in Canada
B	Aiko	f	2	20	No	No
B	Mari	f	2	19	Yes (2 weeks)	No
B	Ema	f	3	20	Yes (2 months)	2 years (6-8 years old) in the USA
B	Hitoshi	m	4	22	Yes (1 month)	No

All of the participants have Japanese nationality. Ryo is half Japanese and half American; his American mother normally speaks English at home, talking to Ryo in English. However, Ryo always responds to her in Japanese. He talks to his father and sister 100% in Japanese. Most of the participants experienced living or studying abroad for a short period of time for various reasons (e.g., for studying at a language school, homestay, or volunteer work), but only three of them had longer exposure to English in English-speaking countries. Ryo and Ema lived in America in their youth while Nana studied in Canada for a year when she was in high school.

Table 2 presents the participants' English proficiency and English use in their daily life. Proficiency refers to their scores on English standardized tests (i.e., TOEIC and TOEFL) and also to my subjective evaluation of their level (intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced) based on their speaking and presentation skills they demonstrated in the class. Following Grosjean's (2013) definition that bilinguals are those who use two languages based on their needs on daily basis, I consider Taro, Nana, and Ema to be bilingual.

Table 2. Proficiency and use of English

Name	Proficiency (test score)	Proficiency (teacher's perception)	Self-reported English use (never, hardly, sometimes, often, or daily)	Bilingual or not
Kana	TOEIC (725)	High-intermediate	Sometimes	
Ryo	TOEIC (735)	Intermediate	Sometimes	
Taro	TOEIC (775)	Advanced	Daily	✓
Nana	TOEIC (780)	Advanced	Often	✓
Aiko	TOEIC (710)	High-intermediate	Hardly (English classes only)	
Mari	TOEIC (650)	Intermediate	Sometimes	
Ema	TOEIC (720)	Advanced	Sometimes	✓
Hitoshi	TOEFL iBT (70)	High-intermediate	Sometimes	

3.2. Data Collection

With students' consent, data for this project was collected from two sources: the questionnaire on their bio-data and the recordings of class discussions. A quick needs analysis conducted at the beginning of the course showed students' interests in various

topics including language and culture, and therefore, bilingualism was considered to be an appropriate topic to discuss in the class. After I briefly explained the purpose of this project, students agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent form. The questionnaire was made up of three parts; students were asked to provide their bio-data (Part 1), answer five questions on their use of English and their definition of being bilingual (Part 2), and finally judge whether individuals in seven scenarios taken from Hoffman (1991) were bilingual or not (Part 3). The students filled in the questionnaire in detail as homework. The participants in each class discussed their answers to questions in Part 2 and Part 3 and sometimes expanded the topic by asking follow-up questions. The complete discussions lasted approximately 50 minutes, and they were recorded by a voice recorder. The recording was transcribed verbatim so that the excerpts in the section below could indicate how each participant used English. Due to limited space, this paper primarily focuses on the data taken from Part 2 in the questionnaire and refers to the data regarding Part 3 as supplement.

4. Results and Discussion

This section first outlines students' overall tendency in defining bilinguals and then focuses on three participants' views on bilingualism: Taro, Nana, and Ema, who the researcher considers to be bilingual because of their language proficiency and frequent use.

4.1. Students' Definition of Bilingualism

Echoing the literature, the students reached a consensus that being bilingual requires being equally fluent in two languages and being able to use them naturally. They also agreed that bilinguals are competent in all the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and that is why all of the participants regarded Individual 4 in Part 3 of the questionnaire (i.e., A Japanese chemist who can read specialist literature in his subject area written in English) as a non-bilingual. Adopting a rather narrow definition of bilinguals, none of the participants labeled themselves as bilinguals. Kana and Taro admitted that they are still learners, rather than bilinguals – this is consistent with the findings of Sia and Dewaele (2006) that self-categorized bilinguals regarded themselves not only as L2 learners but also active users of L2.

For others, unsurprisingly, the criterion for bilinguals appears to be “native-like” proficiency (Bloomfield, 1933), as they explicitly compared themselves with NSs in the following:

Ryo: I cannot speak as fluently as native people.

Aiko: I cannot use English like native English speakers.

Mari: I cannot speak so well, and I cannot understand native people saying in English.

Although none of the participants regarded themselves as bilinguals, three students in

Class A (Kana, Ryo, and Taro) and two students in Class B (Nana and Hitoshi) shared their experience of being considered as bilinguals by their friends and acquaintances. Below is an excerpt of discussion from Class A.

- Ryo: Sometimes [those] who can't speak English or can't understand English may consider me to be bilingual because for them, [a person] who can speak English is a bilingual. For me, I'm not bilingual, but for them, I am bilingual.
- Kana: I agree. Some people think I'm bilingual, but that kind of people don't know about English ... so even if I use English words and phrases wrongly, they say "You speak English well." I want to explain how... how poor my English is! And how I talk with foreigners – I want to explain.
- Taro: The same as yours because I work part-time job, and sometimes I get a customer from other countries, so I take care of them. I'm happy to serve them. That's okay, but other coworkers say, "Oh, you can speak English. Next time when foreign customers come, please take care of them." At that time, only at that time, I felt that oh, I am bilingual – I didn't think "Oh no, I'm so poor!" I don't think about it – they just give me that kind of job to communicate with [foreign] tourists. But in class or other situations, especially talking to native-speakers, I feel I'm not enough to be called bilingual – it's very strange.

The point that people who regard them as bilinguals do not know much about English was echoed in Nana's ("They don't know the definition of bilingual") and Hitoshi's ("They don't know how to calculate our levels of English speaking") comments. Because their criteria for bilinguals include being equally fluent in Japanese and English, they still see the gap between their current English levels and their Japanese levels. Therefore, some might feel uncomfortable if others label them as bilinguals, as Kana put it, "I want to explain how ... how poor my English is!" On the other hand, in his part-time job, Taro seemed to be happy when his colleagues asked him to take care of foreign customers, and he said, "I felt that oh, I am bilingual." One explanation why he thinks differently when interacting with NSs is that the customers were NNSs. It is plausible that he thinks he is competent enough to communicate with NNSs, but not NSs. Moreover, in the part-time job, the successful use of English likely depends on the extent to which Taro can provide foreign customers with good service, for example, greetings, taking orders, serving them food, and smooth interactions for other purposes. In other words, in the part-time job context, success in English use seems to be outcome-based, that is, Taro can use English in response to a need for English, whereas with NSs, Taro might judge his English proficiency only in comparison with NSs. In the former case, Taro seems to accept a definition of bilingualism closer to Grosjean's (2013) in that the need for English is part of the definition. Furthermore, he can also imagine his status in the competent L2 user community as Pavlenko (2003) terms it. Nevertheless, in the interaction with NSs, similarly to other students, Taro appears to think it is premature to self-categorize himself as a bilingual. His unique view of bilingualism is investigated in more detail in the following.

4.2. Taro: I'm not a bilingual, but I'm sure I will be

As shown in the previous section, Taro was the only participant who felt comfortable being considered to be bilingual by others. The reason why he admitted that he was bilingual could be related to his more flexible view of bilingualism compared with other students. In Class A, Kana and Ryo both said that a bilingual is a person who can speak English as fluently as Japanese. Taro partly agreed with them, but he also continued:

One of the factors to be bilingual is to speak English fluently. But, I wanna say that the main to be bilingual is that you can communication with foreign people because if you cannot speak perfectly, you can still communicate with them, right? I think to be perfect in English is very hard to English learners. Even if native speakers find it very difficult. Let's think of Japanese. We are Japanese and we can speak Japanese, but do you think you're perfect Japanese speakers? There are a lot of vocabulary we don't know, so I think speaking is very important, but communicating is for me, meaning to be bilingual.

Taro insightfully pointed out one of the criticisms of defining a bilingual based on NS norms discussed in the literature. He questioned the myth that NSs are perfect users of the language by recognizing the fact that there are some lexical items he does not know in his first language (Japanese). Although he did not deny the importance of achieving the same level of fluency in English as in Japanese, his goal mentioned in the above excerpt appears to be to communicate with foreign people in English. In the group discussion, he did not sound frustrated with the traditional definition of bilinguals, according to which he is regarded as a non-bilingual. Rather, he also said, "I'm not bilingual, but I'm sure I will be." He believes that after having more exposure to English in English-speaking countries, he will be bilingual. In fact, Taro's dream after graduating university, which he mentioned in the first week of the course, was to "immerse" himself in an English environment. Taken together, his definition of bilinguals is broader than that of the others in that he puts emphasis on further advancing his communicative ability in English, not on aiming at being a NS of English.

4.3. Nana: Does the age matter?

Nana, whom I consider to be bilingual because she has the highest proficiency of all the participants and her frequent use of English to communicate with her boyfriend and the friends she made while studying abroad for a year, did not self-categorize herself as bilingual. She explained the reasons as follows:

Generally, I thought bilingual people are those who use English since they were young. I didn't use English when I was young, so I answered no. After coming back from Canada, I forgot many words, and I can't speak as fluently as I did in Canada.

Here, she addressed two important issues in bilingualism: the onset age of learning the L2 and the unstable nature of languages. In her definition, Nana only includes early bilinguals

who started learning L2 before adolescence, but excludes late bilinguals including her. Another reason she self-categorized herself as non-bilingual is because she was aware of her forgetting language. A recent, more flexible view on bilingualism by Grosjean (2013) acknowledges that the bilinguals' languages wax and wane over years, but Nana might have presumed the stability of languages as a prerequisite for bilinguals. Nana, however, did not appear to hold negative attitudes toward her own definition of bilinguals that excludes her from the category.

4.4. Ema: I wanted to be bilingual, but not any more

Ema is another participant who, from the researcher's perspective, fits within the category of bilinguals, yet she thinks being bilingual, which in her definition means being a native speaker of both languages, is extremely difficult. She made a unique contribution to the group discussion, sharing her experience of living abroad in her youth. She said, "I don't want to be bilingual, but before, I wanted to become bilingual". Her family moved to the USA because of her father's job as a priest when she was six. Her parents wanted her to be bilingual, so it was probably natural for her to wish to be bilingual in both English and Japanese. However, the challenge she faced was not in integrating into an English-speaking environment, but rather in adapting to Japanese society when she came back at the age of eight. Her then limited Japanese, particularly in reading and writing kanji, made her feel she did not fit in with the classroom. With her experience of L1 attrition, she believes that it is very difficult to be a NS of both English and Japanese.

When asked who she considered to be bilinguals, Ema gave an example of Japanese people visiting her father's church who spent many years in the States, but continued studying Japanese to keep both languages at native-speaking level. Yet, based on her struggle in maintaining her Japanese level during her two-year stay abroad, she believes that if she stays in America for a longer period of time in the future, her Japanese will wane. Hence, she said even though she would continue studying English, she would not aim at becoming a NS of English. Seemingly, Ema thinks acquiring a native-level of English proficiency might lead to L1 loss again, which she views negatively because of her experience.

5. Conclusion

This small project that investigated university students' perceptions of bilinguals provided evidence that laypeople tend to define bilinguals based on equal fluency in more than one language and to some extent also on "native-like" proficiency in both languages, as discussed in the literature (Butler, 2013). Among eight participants, the paper has paid closer attention to three of them who are considered to be bilingual by the researcher based on their English proficiency and their frequent use of English in their daily lives.

Taro is the only one who questions the common view that NSs are free from errors and puts emphasis on the ability to communicate with people in English as a core of his definition of a bilingual. Despite being aware of the limitations in his English proficiency, Taro does not

put a NNS label on himself, but rather strives to become a legitimate bilingual, competent user of English (Cook, 1999) in the future. Nana, constrained by the traditional view of bilingualism that only those who started learning L2 in their youth and keep their L2 level high are bilinguals, does not regard herself as a bilingual. Likewise, Ema also seems to be caught up in the narrow definition that bilinguals' L1s should not wane. Her struggle with Japanese has made her believe that maintaining both languages at native-like level is "extremely difficult", and therefore, she does no longer wants to be bilingual.

Although the main purpose of this study was to describe the self-images of university students who are highly competent in English, I conclude this paper by suggesting pedagogical implications. As found in Nana's and Ema's comments, the narrow view of bilinguals appeared to prevent them from having confidence to claim their bilingual status. The data for this study did not explicitly show that the participants regarded themselves as second-class or failed L2 users. Nevertheless, it is still important for teachers and researchers to be aware that if students are only aware of such a narrow definition of bilingualism, it could have a negative impact on self-perception, identity, and motivation to study the language. Thus, informing students of a more flexible definition of bilingualism could liberate them from NS/NNS dichotomy and help them gain more confidence to claim their legitimate status of bilinguals.

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