

What is Bilingualism?

Put simply, bilingualism is the ability to use two languages. However, defining bilingualism is problematic since individuals with varying bilingual characteristics may be classified as bilingual. Definitions of bilingualism range from a minimal proficiency in two languages, to an advanced level of proficiency which allows the speaker to function and appear as a native-like speaker of two languages. A person may describe themselves as bilingual but may mean only the ability to converse and communicate orally. Others may be proficient in reading in two or more languages (or bi-literate). A person may be bilingual by virtue of having grown up learning and using two languages simultaneously (simultaneous bilingualism). Or they may become bilingual by learning a second language sometime after their first language. This is known as sequential bilingualism. To *be bilingual* means different things to different people.

Bilingualism encompasses a range of proficiencies and contexts. A young child entering school may be called bilingual but it may be that she uses her first or home language for domestic and familial purposes and that English is her preferred language for communication outside the home. Or she may be largely monolingual in her first language only when she starts school. A child who has recently arrived in England from overseas may have a good level of literacy in English but may be unable to converse or use spoken English in the classroom context. On the other hand, many pupils described as bilingual routinely use three languages or more and thus 'plurilingual' would be a better description. In terms of competence, a bilingual may have very high levels of proficiency in both languages or may have only limited proficiency in one and be far more proficient in the other.

The use of the term 'bilingual' is thus dependent upon: context; linguistic proficiency and purpose. Many educators use 'bilingual pupils' in preference to 'pupils learning EAL' in order to heighten awareness of pupils' linguistic knowledge and expertise as well as their cultural affiliations. [Rampton](#) (1990) suggests replacing terms such as 'native speaker' and 'mother tongue' with language *expertise*, language *affiliation* and language *inheritance*. These terms may help trainees to understand the complex nature of bilingualism and plurilingualism in multiethnic schools.

Glossary

Bilingual

This term is used to describe a learner who uses two or more languages to communicate. There are various interpretations with regard to attitude, proficiency and use.

Community languages or Heritage languages

These describe the languages spoken and used, other than English, in a local community. For example, one might refer to Bengali as the most widely used community language in Tower Hamlets, or Punjabi as the predominant community language in Leicester. In some contexts, the term heritage language is used interchangeably. Heritage language may also indicate a language that is no longer widely spoken but is the language of an earlier generation of settlers, such as Ukrainian in parts of Canada, which continues to be taught and supported through language teaching and cultural and religious activities.

English as an additional language (EAL) or English as a second language (ESL)

These terms are used to describe the learning of English in addition to the learner's first language. The two terms are interchangeable. In England the term 'EAL' is generally used to refer to learning English in an English speaking environment, such as a school. This was deemed a more neutral term and to recognise that, for some learners, English may be their third or fourth language.

English as a foreign language (EFL)

Refers to the learning and teaching of English in a non-English context, such as learning English in Hungary.

English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) is generally used to describe adult learning of English as an additional language.

Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG)

The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) was developed in 1999 to fund schools and local authorities to meet the needs of minority ethnic pupils including those learning EAL. Is often used to describe the roles of specialist teachers and departments.

Home language

This term is used to describe the language used most frequently in the home.

First language

This is a term used to describe the first language to which the learner is exposed. This may be different from the home language.

Mother tongue

This is a term also used to describe the learner's first language and is often used in referring to the language of the home.

Multilingual

This term is used to describe contexts, such as urban schools, where there are speakers of many different languages. It is sometimes used to describe a person who speaks several languages but is increasingly being replaced with plurilingual.

Native speaker

This term is used to describe a person who speaks the designated language as their first language.

Plurilingual

This term is increasingly being used to describe speakers of more than two languages. Multilingual is still used to refer to entities such as society, cities or schools.

Links to extensive [glossaries](#) concerning EAL and language acquisition

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Last updated

2nd May 2009

References

Rampton, B. (1990) Displacing the "native speaker": Expertise, affiliation and inheritance *ELT Journal*, 44, 97-101

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