Are you bilingual?

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Abstract

This study, based on a questionnaire written in English, asks participants (with self-reports of low to very high proficiency in two languages) if they are bilingual. That answer serving as the independent variable, we then investigated whether this was linked to sociobiographical factors and to self-reported L2 proficiency. The results of the statistical analyses show participants who self-rated more proficient in their L2 were more likely to consider themselves bilingual. In addition, three sociobiographical factors were linked to self-reports of being bilingual: currently living or having recently lived in the L2 community, and not currently studying the L2.

Introduction

Bilingual is a ubiquitous yet abstruse word, muddied by varying uses in the general media, education, politics, and perhaps rather esoterically in different fields of linguistics. Flip through journals of or in some way related to bilingualism and a clearer, more concise picture often does not emerge. It often appears the concept 'bilingual' is assumed to be understood by the reader, and is, therefore, unnecessary to define. A problem with this is that researchers in differing fields of linguistics, be they in second language acquisition, language teaching pedagogy, sociolinguistics, or psycholinguistics, may all be applying different definitions to the concept, and readers may be applying yet others.

A further problem with such a widely-used but difficult to define concept is that individuals most likely have their own perception of the concept as well. This is particularly problematic in the study of bilingualism, in its various forms and from various perspectives, because it is most often laypeople (here, those not trained in linguistics) who are the participants in these studies. Several questions are raised by this situation. What definition of 'bilingual' are the researchers using? Do participants have the same definition? Does the incongruence between definitions make a difference in the study? Do the study participants think they are bilingual?

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This paper focuses on only the final question by investigating whether people not involved in the field of linguistics see themselves as bilingual, differentiating between those who do and those who do not; it further makes some suggestions for the relevance of asking the question.

Defining Bilingualism

Throughout the literature, academic definitions of bilingual abound, from the early, restrictive definitions, "native-like control of two languages" (Bloomfield, 1935, p. 56) to the very elastic definitions of today, "the presence of two or more languages" (Dewaele, Housen & Li, 2003, p. 1), which reflect the awareness of the interdisciplinary nature of studies in bilingualism.[1] Baetens Beardsmore (1982) brings to light the obstacle in precisely defining bilingual, stating that it is difficult to "[posit] a generally accepted definition of the phenomenon that will not meet some sort of criticism" (p. 1), often for being too narrow, vague or difficult to definitively describe.[2] Perhaps in order to avoid criticism, definitions and usage became much less stringent. Hakuta (1986) specifies that

> the definition of bilingualism in this book is deliberately open-ended. It begins where 'the speaker of one language can produce meaningful utterances in the other language' (Haugen, 1953, p. 7). This definition is preferable to a narrow one that might include only those with native-like control. (p. 4)

He further discusses the difficulty in defining 'native-like control' and the importance of including the issues of second language acquisition, language maintenance and language attrition in the study of bilingualism.

In the last decade or so as knowledge of the breadth of bilingualism has grown, discussions of bilingualism have concentrated on "the many kinds and degrees of bilingualism and bilingual situations" (Crystal, 2003, p. 51), leading to in depth descriptions of the varied circumstances involved in bilingualism, anticipating the recent call for understanding the bilingual situation through its context and its purpose (Edwards, 2004). Hakuta's (1992) broad definition, "someone who controls two or more languages" (p. 176), sets up the justification for using a flexible definition (the difficulty in defining, the problem of being either too narrow or too broad, and the variability of language competence due to the complexities of language itself); it further allows him to provide a distinction between various typologies of bilinguals and bilingual situations while at the same time, summarizing how various associated academic fields (politics, education, sociology, phonology, morphology, etc) have used associated terms and processes in studies of bilinguals.

Grosjean (1994) furthers the scope of bilingualism by refuting a commonly held misconception about bilinguals: they are equally fluent in all their languages. He stresses that rather than focusing on equal fluency as a marker of bilingualism, it is important to understand why bilinguals need their languages; how they process, organize and think about their languages in those languages; and how they feel about themselves and their bilingualism. Still flexible, his definition, "those who use two (or more) languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives" (p. 1656), does specify the "everyday" use of two languages.

Li (2000) addresses bilingualism from various perspectives as well. After providing more than 30 distinct types of bilingualism, he goes on to interpret the term bilingual as "primarily describ[ing] someone with the possession of two languages" (p. 7) but also states that it can cover any number of languages. He further discusses the complexities of defining language itself, socio-political issues related to language use, psycholinguistic aspects of bilingualism, and the various advantages of being bilingual. Li, like others, constructs a multi-dimensional context for describing the phenomenon of bilingualism.[3]

The trend to move away from focusing on the native-like qualities of bilinguals in favor of the situations and complexities of bilinguals has been both welcomed and contentious. Hoffman (1991) states that one difficulty in defining bilingualism is its interdisciplinary nature, with researchers from distinct but related fields within linguistics "bring[ing] different methods, criteria and assumptions to bear upon studies of bilingual situations" (p. 17). However, not seeing this as a problem, she suggests that the variety in definitions and uses allows researchers "to choose the one that best suits her or his purpose" (p. 18).

Others have concerns about the increasing ambit of bilingualism. Grosjean (1998) sees, among others not directly related to the present study, two problems with participants used in research: researchers not understanding who is and is not bilingual, and the factors used in determining appropriate study participants. His solution to the first problem is to read the literature in the field, which, in this instance, has not proven truly effective in providing a clear picture of who 'bilingual' applies to. His solution to the second is to provide clear, complete information about the participants: biographical data, language history, language stability, function of languages, proficiency, and language mode (p. 135). Mackey (2002) concludes that in order to have a truly meaningful understanding of who a bilingual is, it is necessary for the study of bilingualism to have a "unified theory" of its own, no longer influenced by other disciplines (p. 340).

The problematic uses of the term bilingualism have even caused at least one researcher to opt not to use the term anymore. In discussing the effects of the L2 on the L1, Cook (2003) discusses what an *L2 user* is and how, for him, that term is preferential to the term bilingual:

not only because of the plethora of confusing definitions, but also because [those definitions] usually invoke a Platonic ideal of the perfect bilingual, rather than the reality of the average person who uses a second language for the needs of his or her everyday life. (p. 5)

This reaction to the muddied or vague uses of the term bilingual is being taken on by others as linguistics moves further away from prescribed definitions based on native-proficiency to more descriptive definitions reflective of the language users' realities; this will be interesting to watch terms in future literature.

In essence, historically, defining 'bilingual' has been marked by criticisms, due to vague, narrow or incomplete pictures drawn in early definitions. The recent thought is that in order to know the bilingual participants and understand the relevance of the study, one must know age, sex, linguistic background (including L1 and all simultaneously or subsequently languages learnt), language proficiencies, language uses, language attitudes and, more recently, language mode.[4] Consequently, the shift to providing a well-developed picture of the person or situation involved has become the current practice, or is the desired practice at any rate. However, despite the greater understanding of the complexities involved in the phenomenon of bilingualism over time, one element has been largely overlooked in the literature.

What is lacking

Not entirely absent, but left open to discussion and exploration is the notion of how people perceive themselves. Grosjean (1994) states that bilinguals often do not see themselves as bilingual (p. 1657). In a similar vain, Baker and Prys Jones (1998) ask readers to question how people see themselves: "Is bilingual a label people give themselves? Should self-perception and self-categorization be pre-eminent?" (p. 2). Li (2000) goes further by asking students of bilingualism studies to do a mini-study, "select five individuals each of whom you would describe as bilingual. Ask each of them whether he or she would consider himself or herself to be bilingual and why" (p. 55). Li, and Baker and Prys Jones pose these questions to introduce the rather complicated nature of the discussion that follows in each book and for the reader's reflection; however, it is from these suggestions that this study takes action.

There are numerous working definitions of bilingual, and for different purposes, one may be favored over another. However, whether a person is an "achieved" or "ascribed" bilingual, a "compound" or "co-ordinate" bilingual,

a "maximal" or "minimal" bilingual or a "productive" or "passive" bilingual (Li, 2000), the term bilingual still applies to all. Regardless of how specialists in the field of education, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, or bilingualism use the term, the general population still hold notions of their own of the concept. Subsequently, a hole still remains in the literature: Do those with two (or more) languages see themselves as bilinguals?

Definition of Terms

To put this study in the correct context, it is very important to understand how the term bilingual is being used. As the literature suggests, there is a continuum of "monolingualness-bilingualness"; people at either extreme are not of concern for present purposes. Extreme *monolinguals* are as those without functional or creative use of a language beyond the native language (i.e. those with only a few words or phrases, or those at the beginning stages of language acquisition). Extreme *bilinguals* are those raised bilingual, those who began learning their L2 before adolescence, or those so highly fluent that they are unquestionably considered bilinguals. The focus here is on those who fit the flexible definitions of today, who fit somewhere along the continuum, without native-like proficiency (or necessarily near-native) but with more than a few words in an L2 and those whose identity as bilinguals may not yet be clear.

Rationale for the Present Study

The literature concerning the various types of bilinguals or bilingual situations is vast, and there is a growing discussion of choosing study participants, or specifying carefully what is meant by 'bilingual' in a study. Perhaps one further component of clearly defining a participant as bilingual should be the element of self-classification, as whether someone identifies herself as a bilingual may affect future pedagogy, or outcomes in certain studies, for example affective measures. Furthermore, in order to have a fully developed picture of who a 'bilingual' is, perhaps it is not enough to consider only age of onset, language attitudes, proficiency in both languages, etc, but also whether the participant sees herself as a bilingual. This study aims to further develop the picture of who a 'bilingual' is by investigating if those who self-categorize as bilingual differ from those who do not.

Research Question

This study aims to see if self-categorization as a bilingual is linked to certain sociobiographical and linguistic factors: gender, age, education level, L1, L2, self-rated overall L2 proficiency, years of exposure to L2, method of instruction, number of years living in the L2, number of years having lived in the L2 and how long ago that was.

Methodology

One way to determine how people use or relate themselves to the term 'bilingual' would have been to ask them to explain in detail what bilingual means to them, what characteristics or qualities they feel a bilingual has, and finally whether or not they are bilingual and why. However, it was felt that this approach would lead participants to question 'bilingual': what it means, which qualities are most important, if it truly exists in anyone (as one participant wrote in the margins of the questionnaire) and a host of other questions. Therefore, participants were not asked what bilingual means or why they are or are not bilingual. The idea of this study is to get an instinctive reaction to being bilingual, in the aim of tapping into the idiosyncratic definitions participants have and how they apply those to themselves.

Method

The study was conducted via a written questionnaire in English. In some instances, students currently studying an L2 in an academic setting participated. In other instances, the researchers used purposive sampling, relying on colleagues and prior students living in L2 environments. As the questionnaire could be done electronically, participants were found in Argentina, Bolivia, China, Japan, the UK, the USA and Venezuela.

   The questionnaire consists of three sections, the first gaining biographical information about the participants, the second asking only if they are bilingual or not, and the last concerning self-assessed language proficiency.

   The first section contains both open-ended and closed questions. Open-ended questions include age, level of education, native language(s), second language(s) and how long the participant had known or been exposed to the L2. Closed questions include sex, overall L2 proficiency (scale of 1-10), method of L2 learning, if the participant is currently living or has ever lived in the L2 environment and for how long.

   The second section, described below under independent variable, contained one closed question, "Are you bilingual?" The last section asks

participants to rate themselves on a variety of language tasks, grouped by language skill (speaking, listening, reading, writing and pragmatic competence) on a 5-point Likert scale (1= basic, 5= maximally fluent/advanced). Each task is also provided with a *not applicable* option.

Independent Variable

As the study focuses on self-perceived bilingualism, the second section asked participants "Are you bilingual?' Participants had to choose between *yes* and *no*. As this is categorical, it is used as a grouping variable in the present design. In other words, t-tests were used to determine whether the values for continuous variables of those who answered *yes* differed significantly from those who answered *no* on some sociobiographical variables and the proficiency scales. Pearson Chi Square tests for independence were used to explore the relationship between the *bilingual / not bilingual* variable and other categorical variables.

Dependent Variables

With the aim of understanding the bilinguals in this study and to deepen our knowledge about bilinguals, this study looks at the following factors: age, gender, level of education, native language(s), subsequent languages and language history (years of exposure, method of learning, experience living/having lived in an L2 environment and how long ago). For the sake of brevity and ease of completion by participants, it does not attend to language stability, functions or mode. The purpose here is to look for a link between self-categorization and the above factors.

Participants

Participation was voluntary. Forty-five participants completed the questionnaire, 26 women and 19 men aged between 21 and 62 (Mean = 32.3 years, SD = 9.8), with two respondents not providing age. Educational level is evenly distributed throughout the sample: Secondary/A-Level (n = 14), Bachelor's (n = 14), Master's (n = 13) and PhD (n = 1), with three respondents not replying. The number of participants currently living in the L2 environment (n = 20, 44.4%) is lower than that of participants who are not (n = 25, 55.6%). Fewer than half of the participants (n = 18, 40%) had previously lived in the L2 environment.
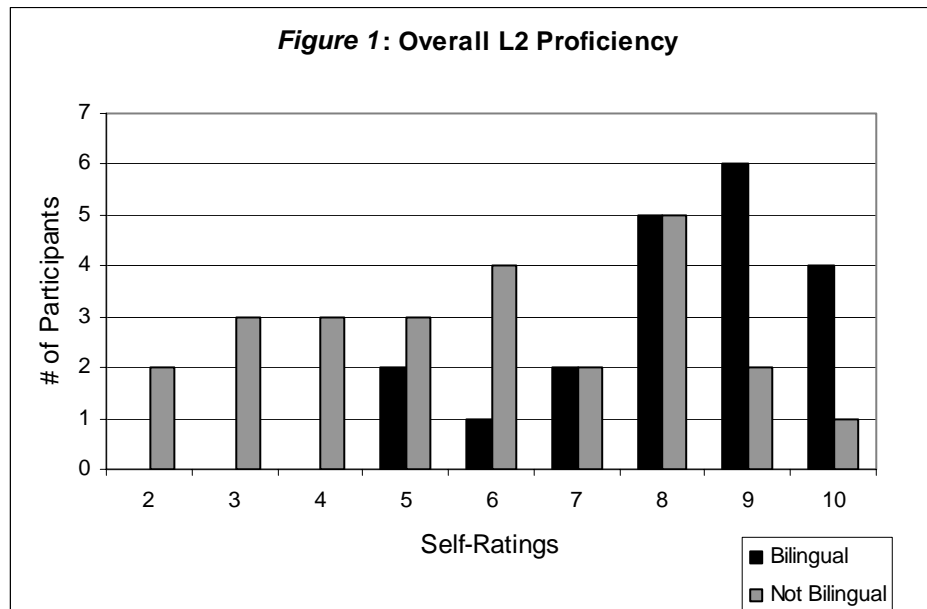
     Participants were required to have a sufficient level of English to complete the questionnaire, but were not required to have English as either L1 or L2; for one participant, English is neither the L1 nor the L2, but is

clearly a subsequent language. This study, focusing on all those with more than one language, chose participants who fit the loose definitions of bilingualism today, without prescribing a proficiency level or definition for participants; therefore, self-rated language proficiencies varied. The participants represent a wide range of first languages: English (n = 17), Japanese (n = 6), Spanish (n = 5), French (n = 3), Arabic (n = 2), Chinese (n = 2), German (n = 2), Portuguese (n = 2). The remaining participants have the following first languages: Amharic, Greek, Italian, Korean, Romanian, Russian and Taiwanese. One participant indicated both Arabic and French as first languages. The range of second languages is not as diverse: English (n = 26), French (n = 11), Spanish (n = 6), Italian (n = 1), and Russian (n = 1). Participants were instructed to list their subsequent languages but to choose one for the purposes of this study; in several cases, participants had more than one second language, but only those chosen for this purpose are listed above.

Findings

Linguistic Factors

As explained above, participants were twice asked to rate their L2 proficiency, once as an overall score of proficiency (scale of 1-10) and again for each language skill across a variety of language tasks (scale of 1-5). For each language skill, speaking, listening, reading, writing and pragmatic competence, a mean score was determined for each participant. The following discussion presents both the overall L2 proficiency (Figure 1) and the individual skill proficiencies (Figure 2 and Table 1).

***Figure 1*: Overall L2 Proficiency**

(Chart: # of Participants vs. Self-Ratings, with Bilingual and Not Bilingual series)

Overall L2 Proficiency Scores

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, there are no *bilinguals* (n = 20) who rate themselves lower than 5 (on a scale from 1 to 10) in L2 proficiency; however, *not bilinguals* (n = 25) use nearly the full range of scores. 15 of the 20 *bilinguals* rate themselves in the upper third of the score range, while the *not bilinguals* are spread evenly across the three score ranges (lower third n = 8, middle third n = 9, upper third n = 8). The mean score for *bilinguals* is 8.2 (SD = 1.5) while that for *not bilinguals* is much lower at 5.8 (SD = 2.3). A *t-test* shows that this difference is significant ($t = 4.0$, $df = 41.7$, $p < .01$).
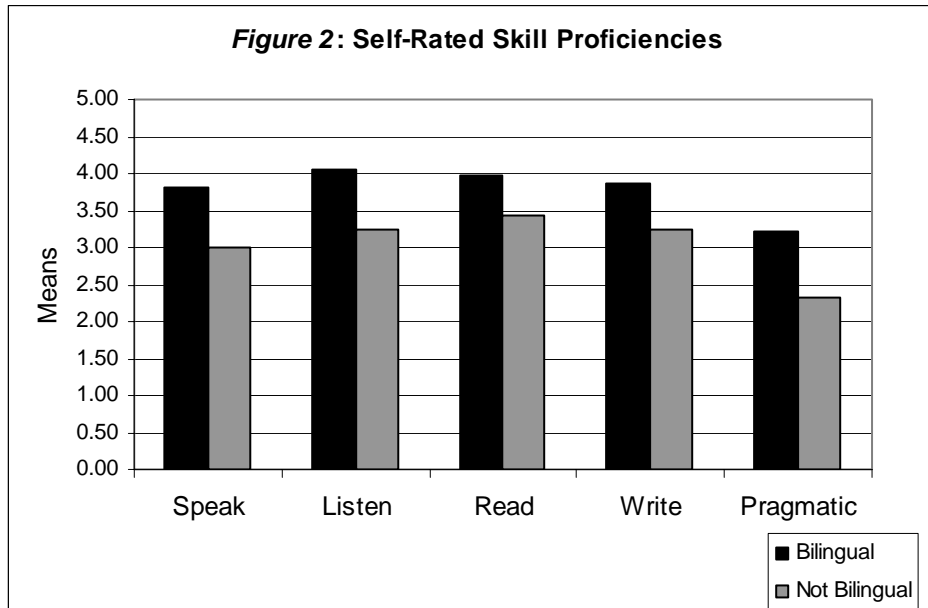
Skills Proficiency Ratings

Figure 2: Self-Rated Skill Proficiencies

Table 1: Language Skills Proficiency Ratings

	Bilingual	n =	M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p. (2-tailed)*
Speaking	Y	20	3.8	0.520			
	N	25	3.0	0.922	3.7	39	0.000
Listening	Y	20	4.0	0.622			
	N	25	3.2	0.855	3.6	42.6	0.000
Reading	Y	20	3.9	0.697			
	N	25	3.4	0.891	2.2	43	0.029
Writing	Y	20	3.8	0.909			
	N	25	3.2	1.043	2.1	42.6	0.035
Pragmatic	Y	20	3.2	0.775			
Competence	N	25	2.3	0.934	3.4	42.9	0.001

Overall, participants, both *bilingual* and *not bilingual,* rate themselves more proficient on passive or receptive language skills (listening and reading) than they do on productive skills (speaking and writing), and even less proficient on pragmatic competence. As Figure 2 and Table 1 above illustrate, the differences between *bilinguals* and *not bilinguals* are fairly consistent; however, the greatest difference is seen in pragmatic competence (*bilinguals* 3.2, *not bilinguals* 2.3). T-tests on all skills show significant differences between both groups.

Sociobiographical Factors

Gender

Table 2: Gender and Bilingual Status

	Bilingual	Not Bilingual	Total
Female	9	17	26
Male	11	8	19
Total	20	25	n = 45

The cross-tabulation presented in Table 2 shows a greater proportion of women self-categorized as *not bilingual*, while figures for the men were more evenly distributed. However, a Pearson Chi-Square analysis reveals that this difference is not significant (*Chi Square = 1.6, p = ns*).

Age

Table 3: Age* and Bilingual Status

	n =	M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*sig.*
Bilingual	19	28	6	-2.71	41	.009
Not Bilingual	24	35.6	11			
Total	43	32.3	10			

*Two participants did not report age.

Table 3 shows that while the overall mean age of participants is 32, the mean age of *bilinguals*, at 28, is younger than that of *not bilinguals,* at nearly 36. A t-test shows that this difference in age is highly significant *(t = -2.71, df = 41, p < .01).*

First Language

Table 4: L1 and Bilingual Status

	Bilingual	Not Bilingual	Total
English	1	16	17
Not English	19	9	28
Total	20	25	n = 45

In the present study, an intriguing difference emerged between the English L1 participants and the other-L1 participants; while of the former, the majority self-categorized as *not bilingual*, of the latter, the majority self-categorized as *bilingual,* as shown in Table 4. Thus, it was determined that comparing English L1 with Not English L1s was the most interesting approach to take in analyzing this factor. Pearson Chi-square analysis shows that this difference is highly significant (*Chi Square* = 16.45*, p < .000).* (For more information on the interaction of these variables, see below).[5]

Education Level

Table 5: Education and Bilingual Status

	Bilingual	Not Bilingual	Total
No Response	1	2	3
Secondary/ A Level	9	5	14
Bachelor's	7	7	14
Master's and above	3	11	14
Total	20	25	n = 45

Table 5 illustrates the participants' education levels. A higher percentage (64%) in the Secondary/A Level group categorized themselves as *bilingual*, an equal percentage in the Bachelor's group and a far smaller percentage in the Master's and above group (21%). However, a Pearson Chi-Square analysis reveals that the relationship between education level and self-categorization as *bilingual* or *not bilingual* is not significant *(Chi Square =* 5.7*, p = ns).*

L2 Living Experiences

The following discussion, related to overall experience living in the L2 environment, is broken into three areas. First, participants currently living in the L2 environment are discussed, followed by a two part discussion of those who had previously lived in the L2.

Currently Living in L2 Environment

Table 6: Average Time Currently Living in L2 Environment

	n =	0-6 mos	6-24 mos	2-5 yrs	5-10 yrs	10+ yrs	M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Bilingual	14	0	1	6	4	3	3.64	.93	.76	18	.457
Not Bilingual	6	0	0	4	2	0	3.33	.51			

Of the 45 participants, fewer than half (n = 20) are currently living in a country that primarily uses their L2. Of those, most (n = 14) self-categorized as *bilingual*, while a few as *not bilingual* (n = 6). A Pearson Chi-Square analysis reveals that this difference is significant *(Chi Square = 7.6, p < .005).* As Table 6 shows, for both *bilinguals* and *not bilinguals,* the average range of time having lived in the L2 environment is between 2-5 years; this proves to be not significant (*t* = .76, *df* = 18, *p* = ns).

Had Previously Lived in L2 Environment

Table 7: Average Time Having Lived in L2 Environment

	n =	0-6 mos	6-24 mos	2-5 yrs	5-10 yrs	10+ yrs	M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Bilingual	7	3	2	2	0	0	1.79	.99	.95	16	.356
Not Bilingual	11	7	2	1	0	1	1.73	1.27			

Of the 45 participants, less than half (n = 18) had previously lived in a country that primarily uses their L2. Of those who had, most (n = 11) consider themselves *not bilingual*, while the remaining (n = 7) consider themselves *bilingual.* A Pearson Chi-Square analysis reveals that there no is difference between those who had previously lived in an L2 country and those who had not with regard to self-categorization as *bilingual* or *not bilingual* (*Chi Square* = 2.3, *p* = ns); in addition, see Table 7, no significant difference was found between *bilinguals* and *not bilinguals* for the average time they had lived in the L2 environment.

Length of Time since Leaving L2 Environment

Table 8: Length of Time since Leaving L2

	n =	0-6 mos	6-24 mos	2-5 yrs	5-10 yrs	10+ yrs	M	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Bilingual	6	2	2	1	1	0	2.17	1.17	-	15	.017
Not Bilingual	11	0	1	5	2	3	3.64	1.03	2.69		

While no significant difference was found between those who had and those who had not previously lived in an L2 environment in relation to self-categorization as *bilingual*, a significant difference was found among those who had previously lived in the L2. As Table 8 shows, of those who had previously lived in a country that primarily uses their L2,[6] *bilinguals* had been in that environment more recently (mean = 2.17, corresponding to between 6 and 24 months prior) than *not bilinguals* (mean = 3.64, corresponding to between 2 and 5 years). This difference is significant *(t = -2.69, df = 15, p < .05)*.

L2 Learning Experiences

The following discussion relates to L2 learning experiences. First, data is presented about whether the participant is currently studying the L2, followed by the environment in which the L2 was acquired.

Currently Studying L2

Table 9: Currently Studying L2

	Bilingual	Not Bilingual	Total
Yes	8	18	26
No	12	6	18
Total	20	24	n = 44

As Table 9 shows just over half of all participants (n = 26) are currently studying the L2.[7] Of those, most (n = 18) categorized themselves as *not bilingual*, whereas fewer (n = 8) categorized themselves as *bilingual*. Of those not currently studying their L2, the majority (n = 12) categorized themselves as *bilingual* and the remaining (n = 6) as *not bilingual*. A Pearson Chi-Square analysis shows that this is a significant difference (*Chi Square* = 6.37, *p* < .05).

Method of L2 Instruction

Table 10: Method of L2 Instruction

	Bilingual	Not Bilingual	*Total*
Instructed	7	15	22
Naturally	1	0	1
Both	12	10	22
Total	20	25	n = 45

The number of participants who were taught (n = 22) is equal to those who learned through both formal instruction and natural learning (n = 22); only one participant, also *bilingual*, learned his/her L2 solely through natural learning, see Table 10.

Of those who were instructed, 15 consider themselves *not bilingual,* whereas 7 consider themselves *bilingual*. Of those who learned their L2 through both methods, 12 were *bilingual* and 10 were not. There is no significant difference here (*Chi Square* = 3.99, *p* = ns).

Discussion and Conclusions

This small-scale study shows that there are differences between those who self-categorize as *bilingual* and those who do not. Certain factors are linked to self-reports of being bilingual: age, L2 proficiency, currently living in the L2 environment, not currently studying the L2, and, for those who had previously lived in the L2, the recency of that experience. Being an English L1 speaker appears to have some effect in this study, but the exact nature is questionable.

The *bilinguals* are younger. This could suggest that younger participants have adopted the more recent, elastic definitions of bilingual, while the older participants seem to apply the older, more restrictive interpretations of the concept.

In addition, *bilinguals* tend not to be studying their L2s while *not bilinguals* are. The fact of being not only an L2 user but also an active L2 learner appears to have an impact on self-categorization as *bilingual.* The on-going formal instruction in the L2 with the feedback and the test results that this entails may convince the learners that their L2 is still developing and that they have not yet reached their "ultimate" attainment. They may therefore feel that it would be premature to claim the status of *bilingual.*

For participants in this study, having English as a first language seems to be a determining factor is self-categorization as *bilingual* or *not bilingual*. While it is doubtful that the language itself is the factor, it may be that there is something wrapped up in the culture of the language that encourages its speakers to see themselves as *not bilingual*. It may be that access to English through various media and common use as a lingua franca provides English L2 users with sufficient exposure to see themselves as *bilingual* while English L1 speakers have fewer (or make fewer) opportunities to interact in their L2s, so they do not see themselves as *bilingual*. It will be interesting to see what light future research sheds on this factor.

One could have expected the *bilinguals* to have spent, on average, more time in the L2 environment in the present or the past. However, these two factors did not have much effect. Whether the participant is currently living in an L2 environment and how long it had been since the participant had

previously lived in the L2 were significant. *Bilinguals* are either currently in or had been in the L2 environment more recently than *not bilinguals.*

While all of the linguistic variables differ significantly, speaking and listening skills show the most significant differences, followed by pragmatic competence. The differences between *bilinguals* and *not bilinguals* were relatively smaller for reading and writing, but still remain significant.

Not surprisingly, the decision of whether or not one is *bilingual* depends clearly on one's self-perceived abilities in different language skills. The difference between *bilinguals* and *not bilinguals* was stronger for the oral than written skills. This could suggest that oral proficiency is more salient in one's mind when categorizing as bilingual or not. Oral communication is usually more stressful than written communication; not being able to express oneself fluently in conversation or having to ask an interlocutor to repeat a sentence is probably more stressful or embarrassing than struggling to understand a word in the newspaper, or grabbing for the dictionary when writing a letter. The impression of L2 attrition might therefore be stronger for oral than written communication. This fits also with the recency effect discussed earlier. The shorter the period since the L2 was last used orally in the L2 environment, the more likely one will still identify as *bilingual*.

Psychological variables may also be linked to the decision of labeling oneself bilingual or not. For example, extraverts, who suffer less from communicative anxiety, are more self-confident and more optimistic, may be tempted to label themselves as *bilinguals* at lower levels of proficiency in the L2 compared to introverts at similar levels of proficiency (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999), a factor not addressed in this study.

This study does have its weaknesses, namely being about a rather elusive, perhaps often subjectively defined, concept. Additionally, a similar study could address factors that were excluded for specific reasons, such as those raised by Grosjean (1998). Future research could not only ask participants if they are bilingual or not but could also ask them why or why not, or for their understanding of the concept or definition and use of the word. Additionally, specific research into different perceptions of bilingual from different L1 perspectives could explain the difference found in this study. Further, as the above paragraph discusses, personality variables may be equally important and could be studied specifically in conjunction with a study aimed at investigating how people label themselves in terms of their linguistic identity. Finally, there are relatively few participants. We are aware of the limitations of the present study; however, we would like to argue it is not without its merit.

There are a few short-comings of this study which should be addressed. By its very nature, it is about a rather elusive and perhaps often subjectively defined term. The aim of this study was to clarify how the term is used as an identification marker by the very people to whom it could be applied. A similar study could address additional factors that were specifically excluded,

such as those raised by Grosjean (1998). Future research could not only ask participants if they are bilingual or not but could also ask them why or why not, or for their understanding of the concept or definition and use of the word. The limited number of participants prevents further investigation of the L1 variable; however, future research into the different perceptions of bilingualism would shed light onto this intriguing finding. Further, personality variables may be equally important and could be studied specifically in conjunction with a study aimed at investigating how people label themselves in terms of their linguistic identity. Finally, while there are relatively few participants in the present study, the results have shown that this area would benefit from further study, from different language and cultural perspectives, to gain a better understanding of how the people so often discussed as bilinguals view themselves. We are aware of the limitations of the present study; however, we would like to argue it is not without its merit.

The purpose of this study was not to determine a clear-cut definition of bilingual or a schema for determining a bilingual. The purpose was to determine if those who see themselves as *bilingual* differ from those who do not. It has been proven that, on several points, there are significant differences. Until further study has been done to more deeply understand those differences, it may be sufficient for studies on bilingualism to include in the research process the simple question that is the title of this paper, if nothing other than to provide a clearer picture of who participants are by stating how they identify themselves.

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Notes

1   For more on historical perspectives of changing definitions or historical overviews, see Hoffman (1991), Romaine (1995), Hamers and Blanc (2000), Mackey (2002), Edwards (2004).

2   For further discussion of this and other problems with early definitions, see Baetens Beardsmore (1982).

3   For further discussions of the interdisciplinary nature and problems with studies of bilingualism, see Hoffman (1991), Grosjean (1998), Li (2000).

4   For more on language mode, see Grosjean (1998), Mackey (2000).

5   As one reviewer pointed out, results here and to follow are potentially problematic in that we are making a rather strong claim about L1 English participants. To clarify participants' living experience, and shed some light on the interaction of language, living experience and Bilingual/Not Bilingual, the following differentiates between English L1 participants and other language L1 participants. Of the English L1 participants, all (n = 17) were living in their L1 environment; however, most (n = 10) had probably lived in the L2 environment. Of the other language L1 participants (n = 28), most (n = 20) are currently living in their L2 environment (mainly but not necessarily English); fewer had previously lived in the L2 environment (n = 8). As most L1 speakers of a language other than English are currently living outside their L1, it is not surprising that fewer had previously lived in their L2. Though most English L1 participants are not currently living in the L2 environment, it is encouraging that most had previously lived outside their L1. Due to the nature of the study, more complex correlations could not be studied, but future research with a large sample could do just that.One participant who had

      previously lived in an L2 environment did not indicate how long ago that had
      been.

6   One participant did not respond to this question.

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