

Article

Who Are Bilinguals? Surfacing Teacher Candidates' Conceptions of Bilingualism

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Abstract: This qualitative study delved into the perceptions of “bilingualism” among 60 students in a teacher education program, drawing on survey responses at the outset of their training. Informed by the translanguaging framework, we analyzed teacher candidates’ responses to identify a range of views spanning from minimalist to maximalist and from monoglossic to heteroglossic perspectives of bilingualism. Our analysis revealed many teacher candidates had a strict and narrow definition of bilingualism based on minimalist and monoglossic standards, especially when considering their own bilingual identities, legitimizing only speakers with native-like proficiency in all language domains in two languages as true bilinguals. Interestingly, their conceptions of bilingualism, as future educators, tended to be more maximalist and heteroglossic when they considered the bilingual potential of their future students. These findings will contribute and challenge the discourses that favor and idealize perfect balanced bilingualism. Implications for research and practice for teachers and teacher educators in bilingual settings are discussed.

Keywords: bilingualism; bilingual education; balanced bilinguals; teacher education; preservice teachers; teacher candidates



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1. Introduction

In today’s educational context, the prevalence of monolingualism and the supremacy of English with a strong emphasis on English-only teaching continue to be evident in many K–12 environments and beyond (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2021; Flores 2016; Flores and Rosa 2015; Freire et al. 2022; Grapin 2023) despite the increasing efforts to promote culturally and linguistically relevant environments where students can use and draw from their linguistic and cultural repertoire (García 2009; Palmer and Martínez 2013) as well as the increase in students who speak multiple languages. The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English learners (ELs) was 10.3 percent, or 5.0 million students, in fall 2020 ranging from 0.7 percent in West Virginia to 20.1 percent in Texas (NCES 2023). In many school settings, even in bilingual or dual language schools, “bilingualism” is often viewed and idealized as having two equally perfect language proficiencies (Tiv et al. 2021). What constitutes bilingualism, and who are considered “bilinguals”? It is a “simple label for a complex phenomenon” (Cazden and Snow 1990, p. 9). Generally speaking, a bilingual person is considered someone who speaks at least two languages. The prefix bi- means having two, and lingua means language. However, the formulation of a definition for one who holds two languages is not an easy task. For example, Grosjean (1982) surveyed monolingual and bilingual college students to determine how they interpreted the term bilingual, and both groups indicated bilingual means speaking two languages with an emphasis on fluency in two languages. This perception was most likely influenced by Bloomfield’s (1933) classic definition of a bilingual, which refers to a person with native control of two or more languages. This strict and narrow view of bilingualism is still widely

used, particularly in schools and bilingual teacher education programs in the United States (Rodríguez-Mojica et al. 2019).

This narrow view of “perfect” bilingualism is influenced by many language ideologies, and one of them is the standard language ideology (Siegel 2006; Silverstein 2018), which generates the belief that the language practices of dominant groups (i.e., upper middle class, native English speakers) hold superiority. Additionally, the prevalence of “monolingualism”, in turn, perpetuates and normalizes speaking only one language and reinforces this hegemonic ideology (Siegel 2006; Silverstein 2018). Another ideology is the “one language—one culture” theory (Siegel 2006), which implies that people have to choose their cultural identity covertly and binarily based on the (one) language they speak. This notion presents challenges and pertinence to the understanding of bilingualism as it is deeply rooted in the ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism (Green 2002; Lippi-Green 2012).

Given these traditional ways of looking at language practices, Bloomfield’s definition of people who can speak two languages, like native speakers of each language, has been legitimized and continues to be prevalent in many parts of the world (Siegel 2006). What is reinforced when we recognize someone as bilingual—if and only if—they speak two languages perfectly in every situation they encounter? This narrowly defined minimalist view of bilinguals presents significant concerns. First, the traditional definition conceptualizes bilinguals as two monolinguals in one person (Cummins 2007; Grosjean 1985). This view favors and upholds the native speakers and the normative ideology that legitimizes English spoken by native speakers only (Kim 2020). Second, it suggests how an ideal bilingual should speak and sound. Taking monolingualism as the norm, these definitions (re)create a hierarchy of languages and reinforce the value of nativeness and monolingual and monocultural norms. People who speak two languages with equal proficiency and fluency are referred to as “balanced bilinguals” (Baker and Wright 2017, p. 9), and there is a social expectation that every bilingual should be a balanced bilingual.

These outdated, restrictive, and denigrating definitions limit the understanding of bilinguals’ potential. They ignore the wide range of one’s bilingual abilities and their nature of flexibility, which can be negotiated in different contexts. Valdés (2001) argued that the “idealized, perfectly balanced bilingual is, for the most part, a mythical figure that rarely exists in real life” (p. 40). In reality, it is rare to have anyone truly competent in two or more languages, across all contexts, domains, and registers (Valdés 2001). Thus, as a way of rejecting the concept of a perfect, balanced bilingual and its idealization based on the monolingual and monoglossic standards—from the two solitudes model, claiming two separate linguistic systems within one person—we view bilingualism as a dynamic continuum (García 2009; Hornberger and Link 2012). Bilingualism should not be understood as two separate sets of skills. Rather, it is a cultural, social, and political communicative act, and it requires a new way of understanding in lieu of treating it as two additive language processes from a monolingual point of view.

1.1. Language Ideologies of Bilinguals

Various interpretations of bilingualism stem from differing language ideologies. Language ideologies shape the way people behave and communicate in a larger social and historical context (Pacheco et al. 2019), which ultimately influences policy and practice in education (García and Wei 2014). A study of Andalusian language teachers’ ideologies toward migrant students’ bilingualism found slight differences in their ideologies as opposed to those who had not been trained in second language acquisition (Rodríguez-Izquierdo 2022). Teachers demonstrated a greater appreciation for the bilingualism of their students and viewed it as an asset. However, other teachers had a less positive orientation toward bilingualism, associating it with deficits and advocating assimilationist language ideologies that favored Spanish-only as a necessity for academic achievement (Rodríguez-Izquierdo 2022). These ideologies included the concepts of “languages other than English [as] endowments” and “multiple languages as a problem” from Ruiz’s (1984) seminal work.

In the current bilingual education context, (Chávez-Moreno 2021; de Jong et al. 2023; García-Mateus 2023), educators strive to embrace linguistic diversity, valuing students' language skills and cultural backgrounds. This approach, aligned with Ruiz's language orientations, views language as a resource, fostering students' identity development and learning from an assets-based perspective (de Jong et al. 2023). Especially in metropolitan areas, dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs have gained traction as parents recognize bilingualism as a right and as a benefit, shifting away from viewing it as a problem (García-Mateus 2023).

It is important to consider the language ideologies of teachers and students engaging in bilingual and multilingual education as well as teachers who teach multilingual children in monolingual settings. For example, a qualitative study of a bilingual teacher candidate in California found that self-reflexive and student-learning inquiries served to ground her teaching in personal experiences as a bilingual (Wong et al. 2020). In this way, teachers need the space and support to reflect upon their own experiences and how they might impact their teaching and relationships with students (Fitts and Weisman 2010). As such, a study of bilingual teacher candidates revealed that when university professors recognized and legitimized teacher candidates' experiences and perspectives, it was significant and empowering for the candidates (Fitts and Weisman 2010). A similar study uncovered that when supportive practices and policies are implemented in the university classroom, pre-service teachers adopt similar practices in their own classrooms with multilingual students (Nuñez and Espinoza 2019). A study of the language ideologies of teachers tasked with implementing a DLBE program found they espoused both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic language ideologies, which were reflected in classroom language practices (Henderson 2017). This study highlights how different levels of language policy can also shape and constrain teacher agency. Similarly, a study of transitional bilingual education (TBE) teachers revealed a tension between their stated positive orientations toward bilingualism and the restrictive influences of what is termed the discourse of transition as they talk about their students, their classrooms, and their own decision making in TBE programs (Palmer 2011). Further, a study of preservice teachers who had just taken a course on teacher language awareness found they still held deficit perspectives about multilingual learners (MLs). They feared teaching native English speakers effectively would mean MLs would not understand, and they would have to adapt their lessons to accommodate them. Thus, the native English speakers would become bored in their classes (Christison 2023).

1.2. Statement of Purpose

In this paper, we challenge and problematize the concept of perfect balanced bilingualism, which, as suggested by Valdés (2001), is largely a myth. This concept conflicts with the dynamic nature of bilingualism and the multiple ways of bilingual language use (García 2009). Asking teacher candidates what they think about the definition of bilingualism can deepen our understanding of where their background assumptions lie and what values and beliefs they bring to the field of education, ultimately having a greater impact on creating a more equitable experience for future bilingual students. The purpose of this paper is to explore how undergraduate and graduate students in a teacher education program at a large public university in a Northeastern metropolitan area in the United States understand the notion of bilingualism in relation to power and equity. The research questions guiding this study were: (a) What are teacher candidates' conceptions of bilingualism? (b) What kinds of language ideologies and orientations influence their understanding of bilingualism and bilingual education? This study ultimately contributes to our understanding of who is perceived to be bilingual, who is regarded as linguistically qualified (Rodríguez-Mojica et al. 2019), and the implications for teacher preparation to shape teacher candidates so they make pedagogical decisions that value emergent bilinguals (EBs). Rejecting the idea of focusing on what students "lack" and highlighting the continuum of the development of bilingualism, we use the term emergent bilinguals (EBs; García et al. 2008) to refer to bilinguals developing two languages or more in this paper. Embracing bilingualism through a

more expansive and broader lens is a process that will pave the way for more equitable educational environments. This approach enables teachers to cultivate an understanding that values the linguistic and cultural strengths of children, their families, and communities (Stacy et al. 2020).

2. Translanguaging Framework

This research is informed by the theory of translanguaging, which we believe to be a critical and social justice-oriented approach to the field of bilingual education and the preparation of its teachers. A plethora of voices have shaped the discourse around this approach (e.g., Canagarajah 2011; Creese and Blackledge 2015; García 2009; Hornberger and Link 2012), describing the fluid language practices bilingual speakers use “without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages” (Otheguy et al. 2015, p. 283). Bilinguals use the full range of linguistic and cultural repertoires to make and negotiate meaning. According to translanguaging, linguistic features are not static but are strategically and selectively enacted through dynamic social interaction to express meaning making, creativity, and criticality (García and Wei 2014).

In this study, we draw from two important aspects of translanguaging. First, translanguaging challenges the traditional view of the two solitudes model, which claims two separate linguistic systems within one person (Cummins 2007). Traditionally, a bilingual speaker was viewed as two monolingual brains in one body. However, many scholars challenged the idea that bilinguals were expected to be native speakers of two languages. Thus, as a way of rejecting the concept of a perfect, balanced bilingual and its idealization based on the monolingual and monoglossic standards, we view bilingualism as a continuum and dynamicity (García 2009; Hornberger and Link 2012; Valdés 2001). Translanguaging has been applied to disability studies as well, such as that of deaf education (Musyoka 2023; Wolbers et al. 2023). In this view, translanguaging becomes an important means to empower both learners and teachers, focusing on the process of meaning making, respecting learner experiences, and helping develop identity (Creese and Blackledge 2015; García 2009; García and Wei 2014).

Secondly, we view bilingualism as a stance (García and Kleyn 2016). The concept of translanguaging helps us see bilingualism as its own phenomenon and view the lives of EBs as unique life experiences. It allows us to move away from hegemonic norms or monoglossic language ideologies (Flores 2016; Flores and Rosa 2015), such as Standard American English or Monolingual English. Given bilingualism as a stance, we view diversity in different languages and cultures as an asset or resource, not as a problem (Ruiz 1984). According to Ruiz (1984), a language-as-a-resource orientation suggests the native languages of bilinguals are a strength to be developed and built on to help students learn other languages and academic content. In contrast, a language-as-a-problem orientation views the home languages of bilinguals as something to be overcome as students develop academic language and learn academic content in English.

Recently, translanguaging has been identified as a pedagogical strategy and resource that can be useful during teacher preparation (García and Wei 2014) as a way to challenge restrictive language ideologies that still exist in many teacher preparation programs (Arias and Wiley 2013). A qualitative study of preservice bilingual teachers revealed they used translanguaging effectively in their academic writing, which they were able to transfer to their classroom teaching through the use of translanguaging markers to indicate a language switch, translating quotes, and writing the English and Spanish version of a term (Musanti and Rodríguez 2017).

In fact, encouraging translanguaging practices extends beyond emergent bilingual students and bilingual teachers, as emphasized by scholars from the City University of New York-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (CUNY NYSIEB 2021). Even teachers who are not bilingual can play a crucial role by collaborating with proficient students in those languages to co-facilitate learning experiences. Furthermore, peer assessment, especially among peers proficient in the target language, fosters a collabora-

tive learning environment where students actively contribute to knowledge construction (CUNY NYSIEB 2017).

These insights showed the potential of translanguageing as a practice in action and a pedagogical tool to defy the monolingual tradition prevailing in teacher preparation. Yet, studies addressing the pedagogical implications of integrating translanguageing practices in higher education bilingual instructional contexts are lacking (i.e., Canagarajah 2011; Creese and Blackledge 2015; García and Wei 2014; Lewis et al. 2012).

Translanguageing and Teacher Education

There is a growing body of research, but still not enough, literature on translanguageing in the teacher education context, and that which does exist tends to focus on the areas of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), English as a second language (ESL), and English language teaching using primarily case study methodologies. These studies argue that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers need to shift from a separate (i.e., monoglossic) view of languageing practices to a holistic (i.e., heteroglossic) view and that the preponderance of spontaneous rather than strategic pedagogical use of translanguageing suggests teachers and teacher educators in English-language classrooms need to be explicitly taught ways to incorporate heteroglossic ideologies and intentional translanguageing pedagogies into their teaching practice (Goodman and Tastanbek 2020; Liu and Fang 2022). Translanguageing and teacher education need to be “reseen and reevaluated” so that the role of the teacher educator in developing a critical preparation program for teachers working with emergent bilinguals is at the forefront (García-Mateus 2023). In addition, it is important that teacher education programs help teacher candidates understand their own language practices and see themselves as translanguageing beings, and those candidates also understand how students’ translanguageing is a way of making knowledge and how to design lessons that leverage the translanguageing of students and communities to democratize schooling (España et al. 2019).

There are positive examples of this in the literature. A case study of preservice and in-service TESOL educators found they problematized their personal language ideologies, confronted resistance to translanguageing at the school, district, and state levels, and recognized the interplay between their individual convictions and the systemic barriers in schooling as part of their coursework and field experience (Deroo et al. 2020). Another case study of a TESOL teacher preparation course found that the students developed a translanguageing stance during the course and utilized a variety of strategies to implement translanguageing in their teaching (Tian 2020). A third case study of a teacher educator’s perceptions and practices of translanguageing in their classrooms as a teacher of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) found they used strategies to create a translanguageing space in the EMI classrooms for content teaching and learning and their practice was both planned and generative, depending on the situated teaching context (Yuan and Yang 2023), which can even be true for monolingual-identifying educators. A case study of predominantly monolingual-identifying teachers in an online asynchronous ESL teacher education program found that engaging in a cycle of multimodal learning tasks provided them with the means to expand their own dynamic repertoires as they made sense of translanguageing because they had to integrate multiple modes of representation to represent their understanding of the cognitively challenging language theory (Ponzio and Deroo 2023). Similarly, an exploratory qualitative study found that content area teacher candidates developed a dynamic, holistic view to understand bilinguals’ meaning-making practices and perceived students’ home languages as a valuable resource that needs to be incorporated in general education classrooms to boost emergent bilinguals’ academic learning and socioemotional well-being. They employed various translanguageing strategies (e.g., grouping based on home languages and providing translations) in their content area lesson plans as a result of participating in a graduate-level teacher education course designed from a translanguageing perspective (Tian and Zhang-Wu 2022).

3. Challenging Monolingual and Monoglossic Language Ideologies

In this section, we challenge monolingual language ideologies including the idealization of bilinguals as well as the minimalist and monoglossic view, advocating for a broader understanding of bilingualism that embraces multiple languages and cultures.

3.1. Challenge 1: Idealization of Bilinguals

Although the common definition of bilingualism typically highlights two languages, the current scholarship in bilingual education pushes for a more inclusive notion of bilingualism with multiple languages and cultures. For example, [Hamman-Ortiz \(2019\)](#) pointed out that many bilingual education programs, especially DLBE settings, promote a binary ideology that reinforces the ideological construction of two languages and two groups of learners. [Flores \(2016\)](#) introduced the concept of “lingual” rather than the bilingual or monolingual, English learner or English proficient dichotomy. By embracing the term “lingual,” Flores emphasizes a broader and more inclusive understanding of language competency that transcends binary frameworks. This perspective acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of language proficiency, recognizing individuals’ diverse linguistic repertoires and the dynamic nature of language use in multilingual contexts. [Sánchez et al. \(2017\)](#) further criticized the fact that many bilingual education programs still focus only on the named languages¹ separately, potentially devaluing various alternative language features and meaning-making practices that many bilingual students deploy.

Many children are exposed to multiple languages, develop a sense of multilingual awareness, and carry multilayered cultural identities, especially in a transnational context ([Kwon 2022](#); [Kwon et al. 2024](#)). Without recognizing students’ multiple internal and holistic linguistic and cultural repertoires and highlighting the importance of pluralism and multilingualism, language education cannot succeed ([Sánchez et al. 2017](#)). In addition, the focus on fluency in defining bilingualism has been heavily criticized by many scholars in the field of education (e.g., [García 2009](#); [Grosjean and Li 2013](#)).

3.2. Challenge 2: Minimalist and Monoglossic View

An asset-based bilingualism and inclusive, hybrid, expansive bilingual education underpins our discussion of teacher candidates’ perceptions of bilingualism and bilinguals in society, including two fundamental ways in which to view bilingualism: (a) minimalist/maximalist and (b) monoglossic/heteroglossic. First, the minimalist and maximalist continuum focuses on how bilingualism is defined in terms of abilities and competencies. Minimalists are exclusive in that they recognize bilinguals who have native-like proficiency and equal fluency in two languages. In other words, the scope of recognition of being bilingual is significantly narrow and limited—thus, minimal. They consider bilinguals to be in command of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in both languages ([Grosjean and Li 2013](#); [Macnamara 2002](#); [Turnbull 2021](#)). Although this view of bilingualism is the most traditional and possibly most commonly held, critics have suggested it is too strict, narrow, and limited in its understanding of how bilinguals actually communicate in their day-to-day lives ([García 2009](#); [Grosjean and Li 2013](#)). Conversely, maximalists adopt an inclusive stance by acknowledging the ongoing and constant development and evolution of EBs, who use their full linguistic and cultural repertoires and competencies to communicate. Contemporary bilingual education researchers suggest this view affirms and validates the complex and dynamic ways bilinguals communicate, learn, and navigate their lives, emphasizing linguistic expansiveness and fluidity ([Hornberger and Link 2012](#); [Valdés 2001](#)).

Secondly, the spectrum encompassing monoglossic and heteroglossic perspectives delves into the diverse approaches and outlooks on bilingualism. A perspective of bilingualism that is based on monoglossic or monolingual standards views linguistic diversity as a challenge or problem ([Ruiz 1984](#)), meaning the diversity of multiple, foreign, and/or non-standard languages leads to further polarization in society. The monoglossic or monolingual view often adopts a deficit-based approach, assessing bilingual individuals based

on what they lack in terms of proficiency in the dominant language, often English. This viewpoint tends to emphasize a singular, dominant language as the norm or standard, considering deviations from that standard as deficiencies. In summary, monoglossic standards view linguistic diversity as a hurdle rather than a resource, and they may contribute to a more polarized and exclusionary language environment. On the contrary, the heteroglossic perspective regards language as a valuable resource and asset (Ruiz 1984). Embracing a pluralistic and holistic approach, it accommodates multiple languages and recognizes language as a fundamental right. The stark disparity between these language ideologies significantly influences and shapes an individual's worldview.

4. Materials and Methods

We employed a case-based approach, which allows the capture of more in-depth descriptions of the perceptions of preservice teachers who are trained at an institution situated in an urban, multicultural setting (Strauss and Corbin 2015). This study included an online precourse survey of education students ($n = 60$) in a bilingualism course at a large public university, Town College², in a Northeastern metropolitan city in the United States, where one of the authors used to teach. As part of the course preparation, they conducted a brief online, anonymous precourse survey to gauge what students know about bilingualism and understand how they respond to controversial statements related to bilingualism (See Appendix A). The survey was mandatory, but no grade was given. A total of 60 survey responses were gathered from teacher candidates: 15 undergraduate and 45 graduate students. The response rate for the survey was 98%. They were taking this bilingualism course as part of their credential degree program. The students were pursuing a degree to become an English as a second language or English as a new language teacher. For most of them, they stated in the survey that this course was one of the first bilingual education courses taken in their teacher education program at this college. The focus of this course was to learn more about the psychological, social, and educational aspects of bilingualism and the properties of bilingualism, its legal history, and the educational foundations of bilingual education.

Research Context

Town College is a highly diverse higher education institution, and the sample reflected a similar level of diversity. As seen in Table 1, the languages spoken were Spanish (25), Korean (5), Mandarin (4), Greek (3), French (2), Chinese³ (2), and Cantonese (2). Additionally, there was American Sign Language, Bengali, Haitian Creole, Italian, Jamaican Creole, Tagalog, Taiwanese, and Urdu, all of which had one speaker in the sample.

Table 1. Languages other than English spoken by sample.

Language	<i>n</i>	%
Spanish	25	42%
Korean	5	8%
Mandarin	4	7%
Greek	3	5%
French	2	3%
Chinese	2	3%
Cantonese	2	3%
American Sign Language	1	2%
Bengali	1	2%
Haitian Creole	1	2%
Italian	1	2%
Jamaican Creole	1	2%
Tagalog	1	2%
Taiwanese	1	2%
Urdu	1	2%

Note. $n = 60$. Some respondents spoke more than one language in addition to English.

5. Data Collection and Analysis

We used an existing dataset collected in 2018 as part of a course survey at Town College. The author who conducted this survey had previous teaching experience in other universities and observed how teacher candidates brought a wide range of language ideologies and beliefs about bilingualism into their teacher preparation program. The harsh political and cultural environment toward many bilinguals at the time of data collection made the authors more attuned to how power dynamics figured into the discussion of bilingualism and to survey a way of promoting critical and collective thinking toward more equitable bilingual education possibilities. The IRB was obtained retrospectively in 2021.

Survey questions were also inspired by the course text (Baker and Wright 2017). The survey included 13 questions (i.e., three open-ended and 10 close-ended questions) on bilingual identity and attitudes toward bilingualism (see Appendix A for survey questions). It was piloted with students in other institutions. The survey comprised three parts: Part 1 (Questions 1–3) asked about the definition of bilingualism and bilinguals, Part 2 (Questions 4–9) asked about the range of bilingual abilities, and Part 3 (Questions 9–13) asked about the possibility of becoming bilingual. Most questions were close ended, but there were opportunities for open-ended responses by clicking on “other”. The survey was conducted anonymously via a Google Form. The dataset has no identifying information such as name, age, or contact information.

We employed qualitative content analysis (Strauss and Corbin 2015). First, the open-ended data were analyzed thematically to illuminate the various notions of bilingualism and the issues they grappled with within their responses. The authors used open coding, in which data are segmented into meaningful expressions and described in a single or a short sequence of words, vivo-coding (i.e., verbatim coding), which assigns a label to a section of data using a word or short phrase taken from that section of the data (Saldaña 2021), and axial coding, which breaks down core themes by relating codes to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking to make connections among categories (Strauss and Corbin 2015). The coding scheme of the main themes used to code the survey response data started with concept-driven codes derived from our literature review on bilingual education and the translanguaging framework, which promotes more maximalist and heteroglossic views rather than minimalist and monoglossic perspectives of bilingualism. The data were coded by the two co-authors in several stages.

6. Findings

Our findings focus on teacher candidates’ definitions of, beliefs in, and expectations for bilingualism and bilingual education for themselves, their future students, and the larger society. We explore (a) cultural, linguistic, and opportunity aspects of bilingualism, and (b) beliefs in bilingualism based on minimalist/monoglossic standards. We also challenge (c) the notion of 50:50 bilingualism and explore (d) the positive expectations for the bilingual potential of future students.

6.1. Cultural, Linguistic, and Opportunity Aspects of Bilingualism

Three themes emerged from how teacher candidates in our sample defined bilingualism: (a) culture, (b) language, and (c) opportunity, with some overlap between them. The most salient feature teacher candidates cited was the cultural aspect of bilingualism ($n = 28$), which comprised responses such as “culture, multicultural, diversity, and a way of life”. These responses all highlighted the importance of the integration of culture to understand bilingualism, suggesting a more maximalist view that validates cultural repertoires. For example, one stated, “Culture comes to mind because you are exposed to another culture and language other than the language you already know”. Another said, “Integration, because to me, bilingualism is the integration of two languages and cultures to form meaning and understanding in the world”. This finding is prominent because often, culture has been neglected in the study of the proficiency, communication skills, and cognitive psychology of bilinguals, especially in the work of early traditional and computational

linguistics (Ho 2009; Rao 2002). A majority of teacher candidates identified culture as the most important aspect of bilingualism, which highlights their understanding that language cannot be understood in isolation.

The second highest response recognized linguistic aspects in teacher candidates' definition of bilingualism ($n = 22$), comprising responses such as "multilingual, proficiency in two languages, language (meta)awareness, translanguaging, and code-switching". They defined bilingualism in terms of proficiency in the two languages, such as using and being fluent and speaking/learning/blending two languages, suggesting a more minimalist (or exclusive) view. For example, one candidate stated, "I'm not sure. I think it means being fluent in two languages". Another stated, "Having the ability to effectively communicate in more than one language". However, some responses tended toward a more maximalist (or inclusive) and heteroglossic (or holistic) view because they focused on concepts like translanguaging. One respondent used the term explicitly and others described it in their own words stating, "I think about utilizing both languages a person knows in order to best learn new information" and "I think of a classroom that allows you to use both of your languages; that is welcoming of your native language".

The last category we identified among the teacher candidates' responses was the opportunity aspects of bilingualism ($n = 20$), which included phrases such as "access, gift, opportunity, benefits, intelligence, potential, and marketable skill". These descriptors demonstrated that the teacher candidates assigned a high value to bilingualism and the benefits of being bilingual, suggesting a more heteroglossic or asset-based view. For example, this preservice teacher stated:

Opportunity! Being bilingual opens up many doors professionally. Many employers seek bilingual candidates to run and expand their businesses. Having the ability to communicate effectively to nonnative English speakers requires patience and sophistication. It is a highly marketable skill.

Another participant stated, "I think of it as a commodity. This is a skill that the other person has acquired, and in turn, can connect with a wide range of people from differing cultures".

However, we did recognize some terms that were more difficult to categorize. For example, words like unique, powerful, and unified did not necessarily fit well into any of the three categories. Several responses suggested mixed (i.e., positive and negative) feelings and experiences with bilingualism, as shown in the following excerpt:

[It is] fun and frustrating at the same time. I enjoy switching back and forth, using Korean and English which allows myself to fully express meaning using the specific language depending on situations. At the same time, it is frustrating to know how to pick the right phrase and word to meet the correct or more appropriate cultural and social meaning because by knowing both languages and culture, I know a little less of both languages. For example, I would have 70% Korean and 70% English when a monolingual English speaker would know 90% of the English language.

This response reveals one common aspect of the realities of bilinguals, who appreciate the benefits of being bilingual but also acknowledge the challenges. The participant seemed to hold a maximalist perspective, which included translanguaging, and described it as the "fun" part in which she can "fully express meaning". She also described the more frustrating aspects of being bilingual when having to communicate within a monolingual context. In this way, she also hinted at a monoglossic or deficit perspective of bilingualism by saying, "I know a little less of both languages," and relying on fluency by characterizing herself as 70% rather than the 90% of a monolingual English speaker.

6.2. Beliefs in Bilingualism Based on a Minimalist/Monoglossic View

Teacher candidates were also asked to define bilingualism in their own words. Unlike the one-word association responses previously discussed, which were mostly maximalist

and heteroglossic in nature, the responses to this question were polarized and varied. In our sample, 75% of teacher candidates defined bilinguals as “someone who can speak two languages,” a relatively common and widely used definition. However, among the 75% responses, there were answers that could be difficult to categorize in terms of minimalist/maximalist and monoglossic/heteroglossic perspectives too. For example, some respondents went on to state:

A bilingual person can communicate one’s ideas in more than one language. A bilingual person is able to ‘switch’ between languages. To be bilingual, a person doesn’t necessarily need to speak the ‘correct’ or ‘academic’ version of a language but should be intelligible and be able to express ideas.

While acknowledging bilinguals’ ability to communicate in more than one language, this student was allowing for the recognition of different domains and registers within language use, highlighting the importance of communicative intelligibility over adherence to a specific academic or formal standard.

Similarly, another student also questioned the parameters of fluency and legitimacy of being bilingual:

A bilingual person is someone who uses two or more languages regularly. A bilingual person doesn’t necessarily have to be “fully fluent” (whether it be spoken, writing, reading, or understanding) in their second language to be considered bilingual.

Although this student emphasized the ability to use more than two languages regularly, they also claim that a “fully fluent” status in all four language skills should not be a prerequisite for being considered bilingual.

Conversely, the rest of the respondents (25%) emphasized the specific and sharp feature that characterizes a bilingual person: their fluency. For example, one participant stated, “Being bilingual is to be fluent in two languages. A bilingual person can communicate effectively in two languages. They are able to express themselves both orally and [in] written [form] effortlessly”. Thus, they focused their definition of bilingualism on verbal and written communication, using the terms effectively and effortlessly to suggest that fluency is critical. This focus on fluency and verbal and written communication is more in line with a minimalist (or exclusive) perspective of bilingualism. As such, about a quarter of participants entered their programs with a more traditional and narrow definition of bilingualism that favored native-like characteristics (e.g., an equal balance between two languages).

The teacher candidates were also asked whether they consider someone who understands both languages but cannot speak one of the languages to be bilingual. That is to say, if someone has receptive skills but not productive skills, are they considered bilingual? Responses to these questions were much more mixed. A little over half of our sample (53%) responded that a person is not bilingual if they cannot speak one of the languages (see Table 2). Thus, they seemed to disregard the idea of “passive bilinguals” (Baker and Wright 2017, p. 7) or those who can understand but do not speak a second language. Although we saw responses such as, “They are bilingual to an extent because they are able to understand portions of conversations,” we also received a series of comments that supported the idea that bilinguals must have expertise in all four language skills in the two languages. For example, participants stated the following: “Speaking is a crucial part of a language,” “In some capacity, they are bilingual, but not fully,” “Maybe they are beginning to learn another language, but they are not truly proficient if they’re not producing English words”.

Table 2. Coding scheme of main themes for the definitions of bilingualism.

Description	Examples	Reduced Data	Codes
Ability to speak two languages	“Someone who can speak two languages”	General description: two languages	Gen
	“Someone who is able to communicate, think and write in two different languages”.		
	“To be a bilingual person you speak another language other than your native one”.		
Ability to speak two or more languages	“A bilingual person is someone who speaks and/or understands two or more languages”.	Two or “more” languages	Broader Gen
	“A bilingual person is a person that speaks multiple languages”		
	“A person who speaks more than one language”.		
Ability to speak two or more languages fluently, accurately, and proficiently	“Being bilingual is to be fluent in two languages. A bilingual person has the ability to communicate effectively in two languages. They are able to express themselves both orally and written”.	Focusing on fluency	Fluent
	“In my perspective, I think the definition of a bilingual person is straightforward; a person that can speak, read, or write two or more languages proficiently”.		
	“A bilingual person is an individual who is clearly and fluently able to communicate in two languages via oral language and/or writing”.		
Ability to speak two (or more) languages to a certain extent, allowing a wide range of proficiency	“A bilingual person doesn’t necessarily have to be ‘fully fluent’ (whether it be spoken, writing, reading, or understanding) in their second language to be considered bilingual”.	Wider, broader, and more flexible definition	Flexible
	“A bilingual person can communicate one’s ideas in more than one language. A bilingual person is able to ‘switch’ between languages. To be bilingual, a person doesn’t necessarily need to speak the ‘correct or ‘academic’ version of a language but should be intelligible and be able to express ideas”.		
	“Having good knowledge of two languages, but not necessarily at same proficiency levels”.		
Ability not only to communicate in two languages but to identify with two cultural backgrounds	“A bilingual person is someone that can not only speak, read, and write in two languages but is also immersed in the culture of both languages”.	Language + culture: including and emphasizing cultural part of bilingualism	Culture
	“A bilingual person is someone who can not only speak more than one language but is able to blend the culture of their native language and the other languages they have learned. They are automatically aware of other ideals outside of their native culture and language”.		
	“A bilingual person to me is someone who is able to communicate in two languages. Being able to communicate and being accustomed to the culture”		
	“Someone who speaks two languages and identifies with two different cultural backgrounds”.		

6.3. Challenging the Notion of 50:50 Bilingualism

Three-quarters (75%) of teacher candidates identified themselves as bilinguals (in bilingual status in Table 3), and the most common language was Spanish. The survey asked participants about their notion of bilingual eligibility—who can be called bilinguals. When asked, “Can someone who completely understands two languages, but can’t speak one

of the languages, for example, English, be bilingual?” one teacher candidate responded, “This is complicated. It depends on the situation”. Similarly, we found many responses of “maybe” or “it depends” to questions asking about teacher candidates’ judgments in determining whether they considered a given example to be bilingual (e.g., someone who has 50:50, 40:60, 30:70, 20:80, or 10:90 language proficiencies in two languages). As shown in Table 3, almost all teacher candidates (97%) agreed people who have 40:60 language proficiency are bilingual, and three-quarters (75%) agreed people who have 30:70 language proficiency are bilingual. However, less than half agreed those with 20:80 (43%) or 10:90 (34%) proficiency are bilingual, suggesting fluency is an important predictor of achieving bilingualism.

Table 3. Percentages of responses to survey of overall sample.

Survey Items	Overall Sample
Bilingual status * <i>n</i> = 60	75%
Bilingualism <i>n</i> = 60	
40:60 language proficiency	97%
30:70 language proficiency	75%
20:80 language proficiency	43%
10:90 language proficiency	34%

Note. * In response to the question: “Are you bilingual?”

Even though participants’ agreement with the responses decreased as the percentage of bilingualism changed, we identified many comments stating misgivings about the construct of balanced bilinguals, such as: “It depends on the context,” “What does 30:70 mean?” and “Who determines the percentage?” By laying out these hypothetical bilingual conditions, the survey provoked the teacher candidates to think critically about what it means to be bilingual and who defines it. The meaning of these proficiency percentages was intentionally not explained for that purpose but designed to serve as a contrast to the traditional ideal of a 50:50 balanced bilingual.

6.4. Positive Expectations for the Bilingual Potential of Future Students

Participants’ responses also highlighted their views about their own bilingual abilities and identities. Despite the diversity in the sample in terms of language backgrounds (see Table 1), they were hesitant to call themselves bilingual unless they had native or near-native proficiency in the two languages, suggesting they held more minimalist views about their bilingualism. For example, they stated: “Yes and no. I speak a ‘dialect’ which is Jamaican Creole, also known as Patois,” “English and Spanish,” and “A little. I speak a little Bengali”. Even those who considered themselves bilingual often felt the need to justify their fluency, such as when participants shared: “Yes, I speak, understand and read English and Spanish,” and “Yes, I am bilingual and am fluent in Urdu and English”.

Conversely, the teacher candidates seemed to view the potential of their future students to become bilingual far more positively. For example, as seen in Table 4, almost all respondents agreed every child can become bilingual (97%) and can learn two languages (97%) even when their parents are monolingual (98%). For example, “I give this question a strong YES, as I see this to be the case with many second-generation immigrants”. This finding suggests teacher candidates in our sample had a more maximalist interpretation of the definition of bilingualism when assessing their future students compared to themselves and the general bilingual population. Further, they appear to see a great deal of potential in their future roles as language educators in shaping the bilingualism of their students in that children can learn in two languages even when their parents are monolingual. The finding seems to represent a heteroglossic or holistic and strengths-based view of bilingualism.

Table 4. Percentages of responses to survey of overall sample.

Survey Items	Overall Sample
Bilingual potential of students $n = 60$ (%)	
Every child can become bilingual	97%
A child can become bilingual when parents are monolingual	98%
Bilingual education $n = 60$ (%)	
Every child CAN learn two languages in a bilingual education class	97%
Every child SHOULD learn two languages in a bilingual education class	70%
Teachers have to be bilingual in order to teach bilingual students	31%

Next, only about a third (31%) believed teachers must be bilingual themselves to teach bilingual students, suggesting that despite their more minimalist views of bilingualism in adults, bilingual teacher candidates still believe they have the ability to promote bilingualism in their students. One teacher candidate shared: “[A teacher does] not necessarily [need to be bilingual]. Maybe they can also contribute to other aspects of being bilingual, such as sociocultural enrichment”. This comment also points to a more maximalist definition of bilingualism that validates cultural repertoires.

Nonetheless, less than three-quarters of our sample felt every child should learn in two languages. Thus, they were positive about the potential for bilingualism in their students but did not feel that it was necessary for everyone to learn multiple languages. Often, they stated bilingual education should be offered as an option but left to the parent’s discretion, as stated here: “Bilingual education should be a choice a parent makes for the child”. Teacher candidates appear to be heteroglossic and maximalist in their views of the potential of bilingualism and of themselves as bilingual educators, but they did not see bilingualism as something to which everyone should be exposed.

7. Discussion

Our study has revealed a complex landscape of language ideologies regarding bilingualism among teacher candidates. The data clearly indicate these teacher candidates recognize the multifaceted advantages of bilingualism, encompassing academic, economic, social, and cultural aspects. This finding is similar to the study by [Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. \(2017\)](#), who found teachers harbor multiple, and at times, contradictory views toward bilingualism. This dichotomy is essential to understand as it offers insights into how future educators perceive bilingualism, bilingual identity, and the capabilities of bilingual students.

The teacher candidates emphasize the cultural richness, linguistic diversity, and opportunities afforded by bilingualism, which is similar to [Wee et al. \(2023\)](#)’s study. However, despite acknowledging these benefits, many candidates still adhere to a limited, monolingual-based perspective. This view often equates bilingualism with balanced fluency in two languages, overlooking the dynamic and varied nature of bilingual language skills.

A concerning trend observed in our study is the self-deprecation among teacher candidates regarding their language skills. Many feel inadequate due to their perceived lack of “perfect” bilingualism, which points to a broader issue within language education. [García \(2009\)](#) highlighted that each language may serve different functions across various domains and among different speakers. A restrictive view that only validates balanced bilingualism fails to recognize the value of EBs and their dynamic language skills.

Moreover, conceptualizing bilingualism as a continuum, as proposed by [Hornberger \(2004\)](#), rather than a fixed state offers a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of bilingual abilities. This perspective is crucial in challenging and redefining traditional notions of bilingualism. The dissonance in the teacher candidates’ views, marked by conflicting ideas and idealizations of bilingualism, underscores the urgent need to address the dominance of English and linguisticism in our educational discourse, as noted by [Skutnabb-Kangas \(2015\)](#). This disparity calls for the development of critical consciousness and reflection among educators, as [Sealey-Ruiz \(2022\)](#) emphasized, particularly on how personal identities, biases, and privileges influence teaching practices.

This study contributes to the bilingual education literature by questioning the definition of legitimate bilingualism and what it means to be bilingual. In the context of hegemonic language policies prevalent in many educational systems, it is imperative for teacher education programs to understand and address their students' beliefs and biases, which significantly shape their future teaching approaches. As [Rodríguez-Mojica et al. \(2019, p. 69\)](#) argued, teacher educators must be equipped to recognize and counter biased language ideologies to model and support the development of equitable pedagogies among teachers effectively. This approach is essential in fostering an educational environment that values and nurtures linguistic diversity and multiculturalism.

There are several implications and recommendations for bilingual teacher education research gleaned from this study. Our study underscores the need for more authentic and inclusive bilingual teacher education reform grounded in recruiting and training teacher candidates for all learners. First, bilingual teacher education must be infused with a more relevant and responsive pedagogy. It is not sufficient to offer an elective in multicultural education, but it must be an integral part of the curriculum. Secondly, teacher candidates need the space to reflect on their own bilingual identities and those of their students and families during their teacher preparation programs. We believe the traditional one-time opportunity in mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion courses over one semester may not be sufficient and effective. This type of self-reflection can foster greater openness and inclusivity of multilingual students because teacher candidates are better able to relate to their students. Secondly, bilingual education as well as monolingual/monoglossic programs that serve multilingual children need to reimagine their curricula and requirements to align with the direction of embracing a broad, flexible, and dynamic definition of bilingualism, which will allow teachers to honor bilingual students' cultural competence beyond linguistic competency.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this nonexperimental, exploratory, and interpretive study. First, the survey was collected originally with no intention of conducting research. Therefore, future research may include other potential variables, such as students' country of origin, immigration status, and more detailed bilingual abilities, which might affect their responses. Second, the term bilingual has decreased in use in many city and state departments of education since the time of data collection (2017–2018), and teacher candidates may be more familiar with terms such as multilingual learners or multiple language learners. Finally, the sample size was somewhat small ($n = 60$), and we are unable to generalize findings at this point. Despite these limitations, we believe the teacher candidates' perceptions of bilingualism described in this study only begin to illuminate some of the important and guiding principles we need to consider in designing and developing a teacher education program. Moreover, these limitations lead us to future research using a survey with more focused and in-depth questions that help us to interpret teacher candidates' beliefs in a systematic way. It would also be useful to conduct further qualitative work, such as interviews and focus groups, to delve deeper into some of the findings that surfaced here about teacher candidates' views of bilingualism.

8. Conclusions

In this qualitative study, we explored how undergraduate and graduate students in a teacher preparation program in an urban, multicultural setting conceptualize bilingualism. Their beliefs and expectations for bilingualism were varied and different when talking about themselves, their future students, and the larger society. The participants showed a strong cultural interpretation of bilingualism, and their beliefs, assumptions, and expectations were influenced by their own bilingual experiences ([Kyles and Olafson 2008](#)). Most recognized bilingualism as a linguistic and institutional opportunity while grappling with the narrow view of bilingualism based on minimalist and monoglossic standards. Similarly, teacher candidates seemed to hold a static notion of culture and the boundaries

of languages when challenged with the notion of 50:50 bilingualism. Some findings are consistent with previous studies that suggest a view of bilingualism based on monolingual perspectives persists among teachers (Grosjean 1982). However, despite these monoglossic and minimalist views, we found teacher candidates were confident their students could eventually become bilingual even if their parents were not bilingual. Participants also thought they could teach bilingual students without being “perfect” bilinguals themselves, suggesting a more heteroglossic and maximalist view. The way the participants exhibit a transitional optimistic view of the next generation’s bilingualism suggests the hopeful potential to grow teacher education programs to help students develop a more heteroglossic and maximalist view of bilingualism.

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Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire

Part I

1. Are you bilingual? If yes, which languages?
2. What does it mean to be a bilingual person? Define a bilingual person briefly.
3. What comes to your mind when you hear the term “bilingualism”?

Part II (Answer Yes or No. You can explain more in the “other” option if you want.)

4. Is this person bilingual: Someone who understands perfectly in English but cannot speak any English?
5. Some people argue that people who have near-perfect language competencies in two languages 50:50 are balanced bilinguals (e.g., English 50: Spanish 50). How about people who have 40:60 language proficiency? Are they still bilingual?
6. How about people who have 30:70 language proficiency? Are they bilinguals?
7. How about people who have 20:80 language proficiency? Are they bilinguals?
8. How about people who have 10:90 language proficiency? Are they bilinguals?

Part III (Answer Yes or No. You can explain more in the “other” option if you want.)

9. Do you think every child can become bilingual?
10. Can a child become bilingual when the parents are monolinguals?
11. Do you think every child CAN learn in the bilingual education system, learning two languages?
12. Do you think every child SHOULD learn in the bilingual education system, learning two languages?
13. Do teachers have to be bilingual in order to teach bilingual students?

Notes

- ¹ A named language refers to a language that has a clear association with a country and ethnicity within defined boundaries of named areas (e.g., Korea—Korean, Finland—Finnish, France—French: [Otheguy et al. 2015](#)).
- ² Pseudonym.
- ³ We put Mandarin, Chinese, and Cantonese in different categories based on how the students indicated their language.

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