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Teachers' conceptualisations of bilingualism at The British School in Warsaw

Streszczenie

POSTRZEGANIE DWUJĘZYCZOŚCI PRZEZ NAUCZYCIELI THE BRITISH SCHOOL W WARSZAWIE

Główym celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie złożoności zjawiska bilingwizmu, pokazanie, jak ludzie, którzy posługują się na co dzień co najmniej dwoma językami, definiują to pojęcie, oraz ukazanie zależności pomiędzy ścieżką edukacyjną wybraną w celu osiągnięcia statusu osoby dwujęzycznej i postrzeganiem własnego bilingwizmu. Ponadto intencją publikacji jest przedstawienie korzyści oraz wad płynących z bycia dwujęzycznym w ujęciu nauczycieli szkoły międzynarodowej. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w Szkole Brytyjskiej w Warszawie. Dwudziestu ośmiu nauczycieli różnych narodowości zostało poproszonych o zdefiniowanie pojęcia dwujęzyczności i umieszczenie się na pięciostopniowej skali bilingwizmu. Artykuł pokazuje swoiste różnice w postrzeganiu własnej dwujęzyczności przez nauczycieli o narodowości polskiej i niepolskiej. Ujawnia również zależność między wybraną przez nich strategią edukacyjną oraz ich pozycją na skali bilingwizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: dwujęzyczność, kompetencje lingwistyczne, zbalansowana i dominująca dwujęzyczność, nauczanie języka obcego, strategie edukacyjne.

The main aim of the article is to outline the complexity of bilingualism, to show how people who speak more than one language fluently define this phenomenon and to reveal the relationship between the educational path they have chosen to achieve this state of "bilingualism" and their own conceptualisations of the term. Lastly, the intention is to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual according to the teachers of an international

school. The research was conducted in The British School, Warsaw. 28 teachers of different nationalities defined bilingualism and placed themselves on a bilingualism scale. The article shows the differences in terms of conceptualisation of bilingualism between Polish and non-Polish native speakers and the relationship between the educational strategy and their position on a scale.

In the modern, success-oriented world, the knowledge of two languages is no longer an enhancement, it is a necessity. In order to broaden the portfolio of available jobs, to travel and to experience the world in its entirety, one needs to be an open-minded, communicative risk-taker; preferably, in two or more languages. Thus, many people spend their time and money learning foreign languages which, in their opinion, will open the door to a better life. Having native-like command of a foreign language seems to have many positives, especially in terms of increasing the number of job opportunities. Hence, many people search for the most effective strategies to become bilingual. However, a question emerges from such reflections; does speaking two languages entitle individuals to call themselves bilingual?

Bilingualism seems rather easy to define and most of the people questioned about it would probably say they know the answer. However, in practice it turns out to be a very complex and opaque phenomenon. Many scientists who have studied the issue believe that there is no simple definition of bilingualism. What is even more interesting is that there is a large discrepancy between what scientists claim and what people commonly think. This was clearly shown by Marzena Błasiak who presented the results of a questionnaire submitted to the general public with the descriptions of 15 different cases of “bilingualism” (Hoffman 1991: 16–17, quoted in: Błasiak 2011: 22). According to Błasiak, most of the cases presented to those surveyed would be considered to be bilingual by experts. However, the majority of the respondents did not agree. Why do ordinary people have such a different view of the nature of bilingualism than the experts? Who exactly should be classified as bilingual?

The inspiration for this article arose from these questions. The main aim is to show that bilingualism, which seems a common and well known phenomenon, is much more complex and difficult to describe and its perception and definitions may develop depending on how people who speak two or more languages fluently have reached their “bilingualism”. Moreover, it appears rewarding to many, but also has some drawbacks declared by the others.

Bilingualism as a multidimensional phenomenon

As it was mentioned at the beginning of the article, there is no simple answer as to the exact meaning of the term “bilingualism”. Definitions vary considerably as it involves a great number of dimensions and many different aspects are taken into account by different scientists. Interpretations seem stretched across the continuum. At one end there are the maximalist ones which assume that a bilingual person should display “native-like control of two languages” and the speaker of a language would become “so proficient as to be indistinguishable from the native speakers round him.” (Bloomfield 1933: 55–56, quoted in: Błasiak 2011: 28). Such definitions, characteristic of the early stages of exploring bilingualism appear too exclusive for many modern scientists. According to them, only those who have equal and perfect competence in both languages across various contexts may be classified as bilinguals.

At the other end of the continuum there are theories equally controversial. For example, for Einar Haugen, bilingualism begins “at the point where speaker of one language can produce ‘complete, meaningful utterances’ in the other language.” (Haugen 1953: 6–7, quoted in: Błasiak 2011: 29). Such a standpoint would classify most contemporary people as being bilingual due to the extent of their exposure to the English language which has become a *lingua franca* of our times. Even in the most remote parts of the Earth there live people who are able to say a few sentences in English.

Why is it so difficult to create one, all-inclusive definition of bilingualism? Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys-Jones (1998) claim that only when we embark upon defining that phenomenon do we immediately encounter many questions that emerge from its complexity. Should we compare the competence of bilinguals to the one of monolingual speakers? Or should we focus on the use of language instead? Can one forget a second language and revert to being monolingual again?

Whilst trying to define bilingualism many factors should be considered. There are many different types of bilingualism described in literature. However, before listing them here, some basic literary terms require explanation and definition. There should be a distinction made between **language acquisition** and **language learning**. Both processes involve different cerebral structures. With language acquisition, which is a naturally occurring process in an informal environment, there are emotional systems of cortical and subcortical structures engaged. Whereas in language learning, when the knowledge of a second language is achieved throughout a didactic process, there are cerebral cortical areas involved

(Fabbro 1999: 108). Małgorzata Rocławska-Daniluk (2001: 12) emphasises that the natural order of acquisition occurs when a child develops two languages within a bilingual society or family, whereas, when the language is developed through direct instruction by means of formal methodologies, it should be termed as **artificial bilingualism**. (However, the boundary between acquisition and learning has become more indistinct as there is a tendency in second language teaching to make it more naturalistic and less formal involving native speakers to develop initial communicative competence.)

Another useful term is **mother tongue**, defined by Baker and Prys-Jones (1998: 47) as “the original language of an individual” and thus the language learnt first, known best and used most. Of a similar opinion is Ewa Lipińska (2003: 9) who equates the terms: a **mother tongue**, **the first language (L1)**, and **the initial language**. However, according to the researcher, the terms such as a **second language (L2)** and a **foreign language** cannot be identified because the second language is the one that we acquire in school during regular classes within our natural environment, whereas the foreign language is the one that we learn intentionally in an institutional environment (Lipińska 2003: 42). The aforementioned terminology may be useful in defining bilingualism and in determining its different types.

Different types of bilingualism

The common belief is that an individual can become bilingual only in childhood. This idea seems to be confirmed by the research conducted by Błasiak (2011), where most of her respondents indicated as bilinguals mainly those who learnt a second language when they were very young (Błasiak 2011: 22–28). However, the research indicates that an individual may become bilingual at any age. According to Baker and Prys-Jones, older children and adults can learn a second language quickly and more efficiently than small children due to their more developed cognitive skills (Baker and Prys-Jones 1998: 41). Franco Fabbro (1999: 103) emphasises that, although there is no age limit for becoming bilingual, for grown-ups it takes more effort and is more challenging in terms of pronunciation and syntax.

Catherine E. Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) conducted some research on a group of Dutch adults and children in terms of the progress made in second language learning. According to the results, Dutch adults were

progressing faster due to the more efficient strategies they were using thanks to their metalinguistic skills.

Taking age as a criterion, two types of bilingualism can be identified. **Simultaneous bilingualism** occurs when children are exposed to two languages from birth and acquire them at the same time. Both languages should be learnt to the same extent before a child turns three (Baker 2006: 4). Moreover, as Francois Grosjean (2009: 1–6) points out, in such cases, the exposure to each language should occur on a daily or almost daily basis and it should be free from the code-switches and borrowings from another language. If a child learns a second language after turning three years old; this will be an example of a **consecutive bilingualism** (Baker 2006: 4).

If the age of acquiring a second language is considered, there may also be a distinction between an **early** and **late bilingualism**. Early acquisition takes place in infancy, whereas in the case of the late one, the second language is acquired much later than the mother tongue (Fabbro 1999: 107).

When a degree of competence in the two languages is taken into account while distinguishing different types of bilingualism, two new categories emerge: balanced bilingualism and dominant bilingualism. The term **balanced bilingualism** was first used by Lambert, Havelka and Gardner (1959) who adopted it to describe individuals who had perfect control of both languages across all four language skills.

However, as most of the researchers emphasise, it is rare for anyone to be equally competent in both languages across all the contexts and all four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The idea of a perfect balance between the two languages seems very idealistic and is considered by many as a myth. Researchers argue that an individual's proficiency in any language will vary depending on the situation in which a language is used and the individual abilities of a speaker.

In most instances, bilingual people will display greater fluency in one of the languages. This is called a **dominant bilingualism**. According to Baker and Prys-Jones (1998: 3), one of the languages that individual can speak tends to be stronger and better developed. Not necessarily must it be the first or native language of an individual. The authors stress that dominance in the competence of one language is natural and to be expected. However, in my opinion, many people find it hard to accept, especially those who, continuously striving for perfection, put a lot of effort into learning a second language and gaining native-like competence in it.

Perception of bilingualism in the teachers from The British School in Warsaw

The British School in Warsaw is a member of Nord Anglia Education, which now has international schools all over the world. It was established in 1992 and for over twenty years has grown from a small school for 35 children only to a large company providing high quality educational services for over 900 pupils from a wide range of nationalities. The school follows the English curriculum and English is the language of instruction. All the teachers (including the language ones) are expected to display a good, if not native-like, command of English.

For the purposes of this article, 28 randomly chosen teachers from The British School in Warsaw took part in a survey, each of them speaking at least two languages. In most of the cases, English was their first or a second language. Out of twenty eight members of staff, sixteen have Polish nationality only, four – Polish and foreign one, and eight of them have foreign nationality (e.g. UK, USA, Mexico, Cyprus, Serbia, South Africa). Five of the respondents declared that English was their first language to learn and seventeen that it was the second one. For four teachers, English was the third language they had learnt. However, six of the teachers who indicated English as their second language admitted that they feel more confident when using it than their mother tongue. It is mainly due to the fact that they have spent most of their lives speaking English, either because they moved to a foreign country in infancy or because they attended schools with English language instruction.

The teachers of The British School were asked to complete a survey about bilingualism. They were requested to define their concept of bilingualism, to position themselves on the scale of bilingualism (ranging from definite bilingualism to definite non-bilingualism), and to indicate the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual at work and also the ways that speaking two languages impacts teaching practice.

Bilingualism scale

The bilingualism/non-bilingualism scale was stretched across the 5 levels. Number 1 stood for being definitely non-bilingual, whereas number 5 for being definitely bilingual.

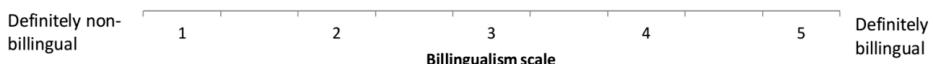


Fig. 1. Bilingualism scale

The majority of The British School teachers who took part in the survey would probably be considered by most researchers as bilingual. However, this opinion is not shared by some of them. They seem to support the standpoint of Lipińska (2003: 114), who claims that there should be a clear distinction made between bilingualism and the knowledge of two languages. According to her, bilingualism assumes equal competence in two languages, whereas having developed only some language skills and using them only in certain social contexts should be classified as knowledge of a second language. This seems to be the idea shared by most of my respondents who would rarely consider themselves as definitely bilingual, mainly due to the fact that there are only some social contexts in which they feel fully communicative and fluent in their second language. Some teachers indicated a difference between being able to maintain a simple conversation in the staffroom and more advanced language used when discussing political or philosophical issues. In the literature of a subject, the first would be termed a **surface fluency** and the second one, the **academic language competence**. The latter requires the knowledge of more advanced vocabulary, more sophisticated grammatical structures and takes more time to acquire (Cummins 2000, quoted in: Baker 2006: 13). However, having developed secure conversational English does not necessarily mean that the teachers consider themselves as bilingual.

Out of sixteen teachers with Polish nationality, six placed themselves high on the bilingualism scale (positions 5, 4.5 and 4) and four low on the scale (position 2 and 2.5). Six of the Polish respondents decided that they were neither definitely bilingual nor definitely non-bilingual and they positioned themselves precisely in the middle (position 3). Those six teachers who considered themselves as definitely bilingual all declared that they achieved high level of English through stay in a foreign country in the first place. Among them, the three who positioned themselves on the top of the scale (position 5) additionally attended schools with a foreign language of instruction. The other three (positions 4.5, 4) had additional classes in the language schools or during language courses. However, most of the teachers of Polish nationality were rather modest in terms of determining their level of bilingualism. Out of sixteen, six decided that their level of English is insufficient to be classified as definitely bilingual but, at the same

time, their ability to communicate in English is high enough not to be considered as monolingual. Thus, they positioned themselves on number 3 on the scale, although the educational path that led them to such level of English was not much different from the one chosen by those who considered themselves as definitely bilingual. Three of them admitted that they had spent an extended period of time in a foreign country. They also attended regular language classes at school and the additional lessons either privately or in the language schools. What is interesting, even a university degree in foreign languages cannot guarantee the sense of bilingualism in those who obtained it.

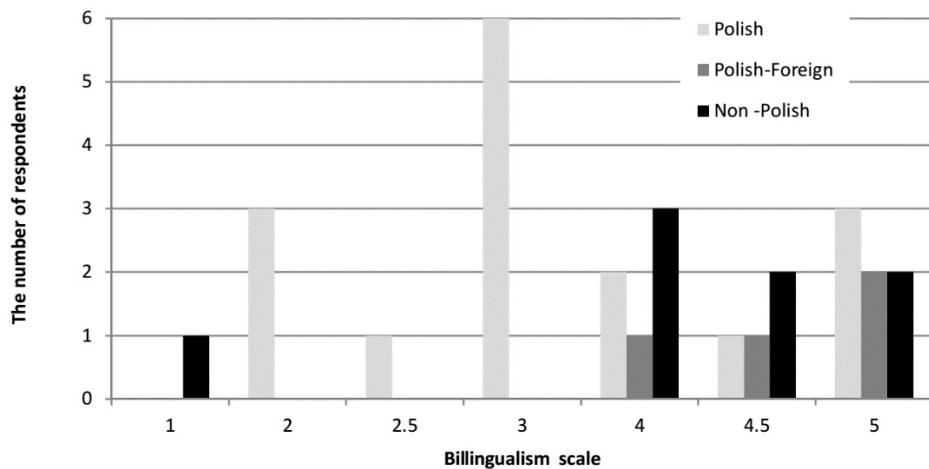


Fig. 2. Position on the scale of bilingualism

According to this research, the non-native speakers' perception of their level of bilingualism seems more forgiving. Out of eight respondents, only one person decided he was definitely non-bilingual, despite being able to communicate in four languages. However, his definition of bilingualism was very exclusive, allowing only those who have native-like competence in English to be classified as bilingual. The other seven respondents placed themselves high on the scale (positions 4, 4.5 and 5). As in the case of the respondents with Polish nationality who classified themselves as bilingual, also the non-native speakers declared that they acquired a second language mainly whilst staying in a foreign country. This seems to be the most effective way of language learning as it develops a sense of bilingualism in people who want to have high competence in more than one language.

Another strategy which seems to be bringing the most positive effects is learning from the parents who speak two different languages. It was mentioned by four respondents with a mixed nationality who all classified themselves as definitely bilingual (positions 4, 4.5 and 5). This may be due to the very early exposure to both languages which, in common opinion, appears to be necessary to develop equal competence in them.

Definitions of bilingualism

All the teachers of The British School were asked to define bilingualism, in their own words. In their explanations there were some commonly recurring themes.

The most exclusive definitions emphasised the native-like proficiency in the two languages (2 answers), the same level of competence in the two languages (1 answer) or the equal fluency in both languages (3 answers). Only one respondent claimed that an individual must be exposed to both languages since early years to be considered as bilingual. Two informants defined bilingualism as the ability not only to speak but also to think and even dream in both languages. The latter were more likely to grant themselves only two points on the bilingualism scale.

For most of the respondents bilingualism meant the ability to speak, communicate or to express themselves in more than one language. All three categories seem similar, however, the abilities to communicate or to express appear broader. They also include the skill of understanding (being able to communicate equals being able to listen and to respond) and writing skills (an individual can express himself both verbally and in writing). Some respondents specified that to be considered as bilingual one needs to be fluent across all four language skills of speaking, writing, understanding and reading. Four respondents defined bilingualism as the ability to switch between the languages without thinking about it or feeling a difference. Among them, two decided they possessed that skill and gave themselves 4 and 5 points on a scale and the other two felt that they lacked aforementioned skills and they granted themselves only 2 and 3 points. Four informants claimed that bilingualism reaches further beyond just communicative skills and the knowledge of more than one language is also a part of the cultural heritage, a part of identity and it also requires being open-minded and multicultural.

The adverbs used in the definitions seemed to emphasise the high competence in both languages, required for being classified as bilingual. Most informants claimed that a bilingual person must be able to use both languages fluently; some also used the words: 'easily', 'confidently', 'accurately' or 'effectively'.

According to the results of a survey, those respondents who defined bilingualism as the ability to communicate easily or to express themselves accurately were more likely to place themselves high on the scale of bilingualism. On the contrary, those informants who emphasised in their definitions that bilingualism requires an equal competence in both languages were more likely to admit that they have not achieved such a level of proficiency and therefore tended to place themselves low on the bilingualism scale.

Ways of becoming bilingual

There are different situations in which an individual may become bilingual. Some are lucky to be born in a bilingual country or into a bilingual family. Such early exposure to the two languages enables the children to acquire two or more languages quickly, effectively and totally naturally. Becoming bilingual may also happen through bilingual education, an extended stay in a foreign country or immigration, contact with extended family living abroad or intermarriage. Some parents, aware of the need for good command of foreign languages in our times, send their children to international schools with a foreign language of instruction, private lessons or various language schools or courses.

According to the survey, an extended stay in a foreign country seemed the most effective strategy for becoming bilingual. Out of twenty eight teachers who took part in the research, sixteen indicated that path and only five of them placed themselves low on the scale (positions 1, 2 and 3). Ten respondents mentioned a school with foreign language of instruction. Eight of them classified themselves as definitely bilingual, whereas two positioned themselves low on the scale (position 2). Eight informants indicated the parents as the part of the process of becoming bilingual. They all considered themselves as definitely bilingual. Thirteen respondents pointed out additional language lessons provided after regular classes in school. This also seemed an effective strategy as only three of them decided that they are exactly half way between bilingualism and monolingualism, whereas the others positioned themselves high on the scale. Three respondents admitted that they learnt a second language due to marrying

a foreigner but one of them decided that it did not help her to become bilingual. Only two respondents mentioned regular school lessons as the way of becoming bilingual and they both placed themselves low on the scale (position 2 and 3). This may signal the challenging nature of teaching languages in state schools. Finally, eight teachers, mainly those of Polish nationality, admitted that working in The British School has helped them in developing a good command of foreign language. This seems to confirm the theory that one may become bilingual at any age and it is also a good evidence to long-life learning.

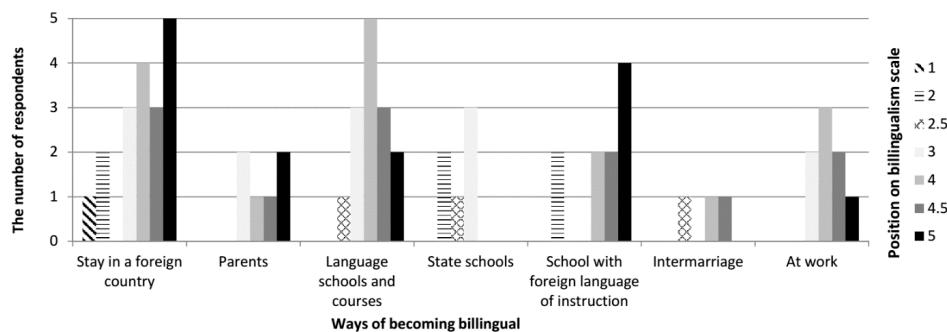


Fig. 3. Ways of becoming bilingual

Advantages and disadvantages of being a bilingual teacher

According to some researchers there are many advantages of being bilingual. An individual can easily communicate with people of other cultures and languages, become literate in more than one language or learn other languages more easily. Bilingual people are considered as more flexible, more creative and open-minded. And of course, what is crucial in our times, they have wider access to available jobs.

The results of the survey conducted in The British School seemed to confirm all of the above, especially in terms of gaining employment. Most of the respondents admitted that being bilingual or knowing two languages increased their job opportunities as they would not have been employed in the British School if they could not speak English. This language, for the majority of my respondents, was their second or third language.

Additionally, knowing two languages contributes to a better understanding of the linguistic hurdles and frustrations that children may experience when

learning in an international school with a foreign language of instruction. Some teachers admitted that being bilingual makes them more sensitive to beginners as, having gone through the same stages of language development, they empathise with them. Moreover, being bilingual and knowing different linguistic systems gives a teacher in an international school not only a better understanding of children's ways of thinking, but also of their cultural needs. Hand in hand with understanding goes the ability to help the children to overcome their language difficulties. Many of the surveyed teachers admitted that, as they speak two languages, they can easily help the children to phrase something in a foreign language or even to solve their everyday problems. However, such situations have their drawbacks, as indicated by the respondents. Children who are aware that the teachers speak good Polish or French tend to rely too much on their translations and would come to get some help instead of investigating how to solve the problem on their own. Some teachers indicated that working in a second or a third language may lead to some language mistakes or being mixed up between the languages. Sometimes, teachers feel frustrated when they need time to find an adequate expression in the second or even their first language, especially when someone is awaiting an immediate answer. Commonly, people assume that knowing two languages makes an individual a good translator, which is not true. Some of the informants admitted that they are often asked to translate things at work or after work and sometimes there are too many jobs delegated to them due to the fact they are fluent in two languages.

However, as most of the informants readily admitted, being able to speak more than one language (whether they considered themselves as bilingual or not) is for them more beneficial rather than annoying or frustrating. Ten out of twenty eight teachers who took part in the survey could not find any drawbacks at all and some even inquired "Is it possible that there aren't any?"

Conclusions

One of the common myths about bilingualism is that it is a very rare phenomenon and is achieved only in childhood. Grosjean (2009) tries to challenge such beliefs by saying that over half of the world is bilingual and the number is growing every year. Moreover, one can also become bilingual in adolescence although such individuals may never be able to develop native-like pronunciation.

Furthermore, having equal and perfect competence in the two languages is not a prerequisite to be classified as a bilingual.

According to the survey conducted in The British School, such myths are just myths in the opinion of most of the teachers. However, since they are expected to exhibit very good or native-like command of English they are very special cases. Working in the international environment increases their metalinguistic knowledge. Switching from language to language on a regular basis makes them more flexible and aware of the linguistic processes. Thus, most of the respondents (17 out of 28) described themselves as bilingual. They all indicated that they had achieved such a high level of competence in the foreign language thanks to bilingual parents, a stay in a foreign country or by attending schools with foreign language instruction.

Despite very good or even excellent knowledge of more than one language, five informants described themselves as definitely non-bilingual. Those were more likely to define bilingualism as equal competence in both languages. The remaining six teachers, of Polish nationality, decided that they are in between bilingualism and monolingualism. It was interesting that Polish teachers were less inclined to place themselves favourably on the bilingualism scale, whereas non-Polish were more forgiving. Perhaps what the Polish teachers lacked was a stay in a foreign country to make them feel more linguistically competent and confident.

Educational strategies for developing native-like command of a foreign language are often important for the parents who would like to raise a bilingual child. Convinced that the early exposure to both languages may enable a child to achieve very high competence in at least two languages, they try different ways. One of the most effective strategies, recommended by Grosjean (2009: 1–6), is a “home-outside the home strategy”, when one of the languages is used within family and the other one in school for example. I believe this may be a good explanation for the growing popularity of international schools with a foreign language of instruction (e.g. The British School, Warsaw). This was also confirmed by some of my respondents who chose such an educational path in the past, which led them to bilingualism.

To sum up, whether the teachers considered themselves as bilingual or not, they admitted that being able to speak and understand more than one language is very beneficial not only in terms of getting a better job but also with regard to their teaching skills. Understanding and being able to help with the linguistic

hurdles that children in the international school need to face makes them better teachers as they feel they may smooth the path which their students need to follow.

Perhaps, instead of looking for one, all-inclusive definition of bilingualism, it would be better to allow for interpretation rather than confining it to such a narrow frame. This would allow some people to feel that something as exclusive as bilingualism is accessible and not impossible to achieve.

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