

# BILINGUAL, BASIC OR FLUENT: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

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By Jaymie Pompeo, Career Coach



Growing up, my entire family instilled the value of a second language. My parents are native speakers and placed heavy emphasis on using Spanish at home while my English developed through the help of Sesame Street and elementary school. From there, summer vacations to

Ecuador became an immersion program where my *Abuelita* greeted me with workbooks – and lots of tough love – to provide a true understanding of proper Spanish.

Not only was her goal to do away with my *gringa* accent, but she was the one that taught me to read, write, and understand the grammar behind this language. While at the time I considered it a pain to do “homework”, the hard work paid off and I can honestly say that I am fluent in Spanish. It’s been a useful skill in many areas of my life, including when I market myself professionally.

As a Career Coach, I’ve noticed trends where language skills are either incorrectly classified or overstated. Sometimes, the terms to define language abilities are pretty vague and used loosely, which may cause a misrepresentation of how skilled you are in a foreign language. Imagine the embarrassment of having to demonstrate this skill during an interview if you’ve overstated your abilities on your resume.

While it may seem nit-picky, understanding your language proficiency is crucial to avoid false impressions. [The Accredited Language Services](#) provided some clarity on

common labels which are included in the summary below:

- **Basic:** The knowledge of vocabulary words, ability to speak simple phrases or sentences; elementary reading and writing skills.
- **Conversant:** An intermediate level of language where you may be skilled in carrying through conversations, but there is greater formality and less familiarity compared to a native and fluent speaker; reading and writing skills may or may not be at the same level.
- **Fluent:** The ability to speak the language near perfect (almost like a native), but may require more concentration to communicate thoughts, idioms, and slang; advanced reading and writing skills.
- **Native Speaker:** This applies to the first language you learned; the one that dominated your youth, and therefore the language you primarily choose to think, read, and write in.
- **Bilingual:** The ability to use two languages with equal fluency; often times this term is misused as you may be a native speaker of one language and only fluent or conversant in the second.

Having advanced skill and fluency in foreign languages is a valuable asset to market in this global economy. Remember to accurately state your proficiency and demonstrate how you can use that foreign language in your desired opportunity – it will always help set you apart from other candidates.

## 4 COMMENTS



**Linda** on April 3, 2018 at 3:49 am

Wondering: I feel like I am past fluent in English, I understand slang and I teach the language to native speakers (I am a teacher in the UK), would you say I am bilingual?



Reply





**katherine** on January 1, 2019 at 10:57 pm

Great Post! Hope you share more article.

Reply



**Rae** on January 25, 2019 at 2:22 am

Thanks for sharing this fruitful content and share more about language and education.

Reply



**Charioteer** on September 29, 2021 at 9:34 am

Very helpful post thanks for sharing.

Reply

## TRACKBACKS/PINGBACKS

1. [The Classification of Language Skills: What's the Difference? | Online Career Tips](#) - [...] This article originally appeared at Careers in Government. [...]
2. [Bilingual, Basic or Fluent: What are the Differences? – Arts + Sciences Career Services | Indiana University Bloomington](#) - [...] language is required, it's important to know how to accurately describe your skills. This blog post provides a summary...

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(524664)

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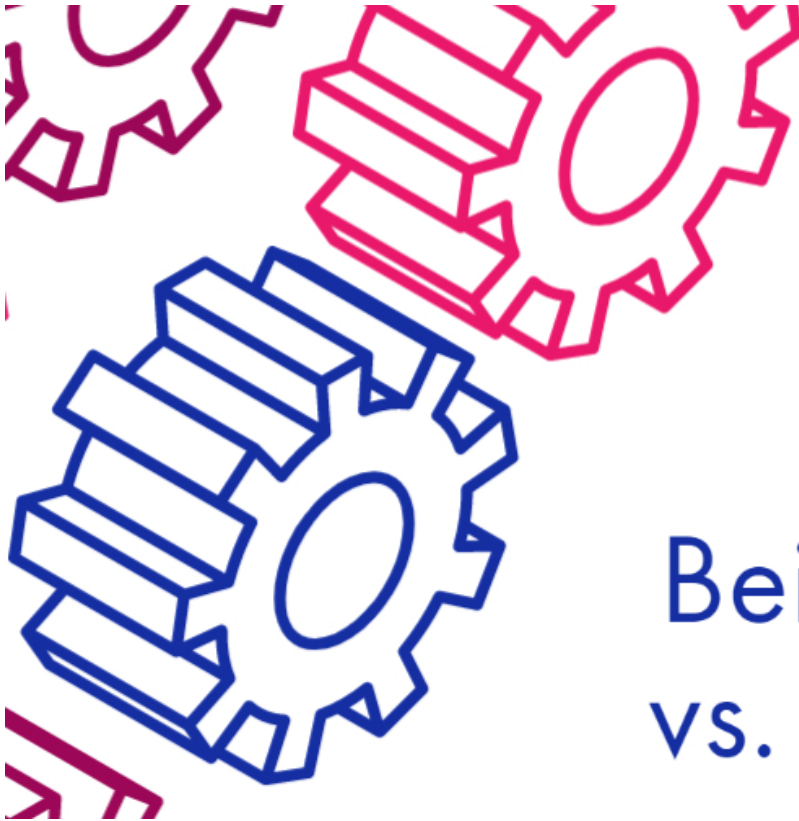
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December 4, 2020

## Being Bilingual vs. Being Fluent



## Being Bilingual vs. Being Fluent

What's the difference between being bilingual and being fluent in a language? Anyone who has worked to become fluent in a second language can tell you that being fluent in a second language and being bilingual are not the same thing. The Accredited Language Services (<https://www.alsintl.com/blog/language-proficiency/>), provided some clarity on common labels which are included in the summary below:

- Basic: The knowledge of vocabulary words, ability to speak simple phrases or sentences; elementary reading and writing skills.
- Conversant: An intermediate level of language where you may be skilled in carrying through conversations, but there is greater formality and less familiarity compared to a native and fluent speaker; reading and writing skills may or may not be at the same level.
- Fluent: The ability to speak the language near perfect (almost like a native), but may require more concentration to communicate thoughts, idioms, and slang; advanced reading and writing skills.
- Native Speaker: This applies to the first language you learned; the one that dominated your youth, and therefore the language you primarily choose to think, read, and write in.
- Bilingual: The ability to use two languages with equal fluency; often times this term is misused as you may be a native speaker of one language and only fluent or conversant in the second.

Fluency in another language is almost like riding a bike where it almost becomes second nature but may take a second to remember again. For those who are fluent in another language may need to occasionally refresh themselves on when to use certain words or grammar rules. However, being bilingual means you can think in either language easily with little or no mistakes.

Are you bilingual or fluent in a language? Comment below and share with us.

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