



# Bilingualism as a potential way to strengthen psychological resources: confidence and the ability to express one's emotions. Positive development through learning a foreign language – a pilot study<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the issue of the relationship between knowledge of a foreign language and the phenomenon of cultural frames switching and indicators of positive development and functioning in adulthood. Previous research analyses have focused on psychological resources that facilitate learning a foreign language, or on the psychological benefits of bilingualism, e.g. in children of emigrants. However, there is a lack of research focused on the development of psychological resources as a result of fluent communication in several languages. The article is a report on a study conducted in a mixed model among 64 people aged between 18 and 49 ( $x = 22.19$ ;  $sd = 5.27$ ). The results indicate that the participants using a foreign language, compared to their native language, notice positive differences in the level of intensity of psychological resources. When using a foreign language, the participants observe greater self-confidence, freedom in expressing emotions and communicating. An increase in the sense of one's own competence, a positive attitude towards oneself and building bonds are fundamental indicators of a person's positive development. The key practical implications for the functioning of children, adolescents and adults were discussed in the discussion of the results.

**Keywords:** foreign language, bilingualism, cultural frames switching, positive development, self-confidence, positive psychology

## 1. Using a foreign language and cognitive and emotional functioning

Language is a system of verbal and non-verbal signs that enable interpersonal communication (De Stefani, De Marco, 2019). It serves an integrative function, strengthening social bonds, uniting people and enabling the creation of a community. Thanks to it, you can convey information and share knowledge, express feelings, emotions and attitudes, and also influence the behavior of others (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2006; Fabbro, Fabbro, Crescentini, 2022; Jensen, 2014).

In the 21st century, where language skills are rapidly developing and more and more people speak several foreign languages, it is interesting to look for the

relationship between communicating in several languages and functioning in various spheres: cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal. Therefore, the analysis of cultural frame switching (CFS) is gaining popularity among researchers (Pope, 2020; Ramirez-Esparza et al. 2006; West, Zhang, Yampolsky, Sasaki, 2018; West, Muise, Sasaki, 2021). This is a situation in which a person, when switching from one language to another, changes his or her behavior by adopting the culture and intensity of personality traits characteristic of the language in which he or she currently communicates (Hong, Chiu and Kung, 1997; Kreidler and Dyson, 2016; Ramirez-Esparza et al. 2006).

Previous research results suggest that switching cultural frames may concern several areas of functioning. Depending on the language used, cognitive

<sup>1</sup> Article in polish language: [https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/60P\\_BarM.pdf](https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/60P_BarM.pdf)

abilities change: perception of time and events, problem solving, categorization of objects, and solving socio-moral dilemmas (Arieli, Sagiv, 2018; Bloom, 2000; Costa et al., 2014). Using a language with an extensive tense system appears to support understanding of complex temporal sequences and understanding the causality of events. Depending on the language used, the way of planning or organizing events also differs. In turn, the level of development of the grammatical structure may be important for multidimensional thinking. Using complex language structures encourages the development of more abstract categories of thinking, while using language with simpler grammar allows you to focus on specifics and direct experiences (“here and now”). Moreover, grammar and sentence structure play an important role in shaping cognitive processes such as memory, categorization and understanding (Imai, Kanero, Masuda, 2016). This conclusion is consistent with the results of research conducted in a group of bilingual children speaking English and Japanese. Differences in the form and function of narratives in both languages were observed. The language the child used was important for the organization of the story: the descriptions in English were organized around a sequence of events and focused on individual experiences, while the story in Japanese contained more references to social norms and the narrator emphasized the relationships between characters. Additionally, the structure of the narrative in English was more linear (there was a beginning, middle, and end), while in Japanese there was a focus on context and shared experiences (Minami, 2005). In turn, a study conducted among adult Americans of Mexican origin (who speak English and Spanish fluently) showed differences in the intensity of personality traits depending on the language used. The respondents speaking English were characterized by a higher level of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience, as well as a lower level of neuroticism compared to the self-assessment made in Spanish (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2006). Similarly, differences in the intensity of personality traits were observed in respondents when they spoke English or Swedish (Dylman, Zakrisson, 2023). Differences between individual languages

may not only be important for the cognitive sphere and the intensity of personality traits, but also for the emotional sphere. In cultures with complex linguistic systems, it is possible to recognize and manage emotions more precisely. In turn, when using a language with a less complex system, expressing emotions becomes more spontaneous. It is worth paying attention to the issue of linguistic richness. Languages with a developed emotional vocabulary allow for a more accurate description of one’s current state (e.g. Russian has more words to describe sadness), while those with a smaller range of emotional expressions may limit the way people experience, understand and express their feelings (Perlovsky, 2009). It varies depending on the language used not only a culture-specific way of expressing and regulating emotions, but and self-perception (Boski, 2022; Cheng, Rizkallah, Narizhnaya, 2020; Gross, 2008; Marian, Kaushanskaya, 2004; Matsumoto, Yo, Nakagawa, 2008; Sheppes, Suri, Gross, 2015). A study comparing attitudes towards oneself showed that using the Russian language facilitated stronger identification with collective values (seeing oneself as part of a social group) compared to individual values typical of Western culture. When using Russian, study participants were more likely to use expressions such as “our family” and were less likely to formulate sentences such as “me and my family.” However, when using English, which is more associated with an individualistic culture, participants more often demonstrated values related to autonomy and more clearly marked their distinctiveness as individuals (although they still perceived themselves as part of a community). The results suggest that switching between cultures can affect the way you think about yourself, your self-presentation, and your perception of relationships such as family relationships (Marian, Kaushanskaya, 2004).

From the perspective of this study, the issue of linking bilingualism and cultural switching with positive development is interesting and adaptation to the challenges of adulthood. The study is part of the trend of analyzes concerning the connection between learning a foreign language and the development of psychological resources, e.g., increasing the level of self-esteem (Guban-Caisido, 2020; Rubio, 2021).

The theory of positive youth development comes from the need for the development of children at risk of social exclusion. Focuses on developing strengths and potential, and to a lesser extent on denying shortcomings and deficits (Barłóg, 2023). Researchers of positive development identify five key areas where high levels of intensity and satisfaction in an individual's life contribute to their successful adaptation in adulthood. The five indicators are: a sense of one's own competences (competence), a positive attitude towards oneself (confidence), concern for others (caring), the ability to solve dilemmas and socio-moral situations (character) and the quality of bonds (connection) (Barłóg, 2023; Geldhof et al. 2014, Lerner et al. 2005). A high level of the above-mentioned variables promotes, among others, life satisfaction and the implementation of development tasks (Barłóg, 2023; Dervishi et al., 2024; Mahadzirah et al., 2014; Orejudo et al., 2021; Shek, Leung, 2013). Currently, many preventive activities are carried out aimed at developing the participants' potential and their strengths. Often these programs focus on development through sports (Holt, 2016; Holt, Deal, Pankow, 2020; Newman et al. 2020), or other interests (Feenstra, 2015; Rice, Girvin, Primak, 2014). It is therefore worth considering whether the use of language talent can be a potential component of a preventive program for adolescents and adults, which is why this study focused on the analysis of the relationship between cultural switching, bilingualism and psychosocial functioning.

## **2. Own research methodology**

### **2.1. Purpose and method**

The purpose of the research was to analyze the relationship between use in a foreign language for bilingual people (speaking a foreign language fluently) and the intensity of indicators of positive development depending on the language used. Indicators of positive development include competence, confidence, character, caring and connection.

This study focused on the subjective state, i.e. the sense of change in the intensity of indicators of positive development depending on the language used. Due to the limited number of studies combining areas of positive development with switching cultural frameworks, the study was of a pilot nature and exploratory, in which a diagnostic survey was used. Previous research related to language acquisition has focused on quantitative analyzes (Lesiak-Bielawska, 2019), while for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon explored in the study, it was decided to conduct a survey combining the features of quantitative and qualitative research. In total, the survey consisted of 13 questions regarding the sense of change in psychosocial functioning depending on the language used.

The main research question of the presented work is as follows: do the following changes when using a foreign language: the sense of confidence, the sense of personal competence and the sense of interpersonal competence (character, caring and connection)?

The practical purpose of the work is to present recommendations regarding the use of a foreign language and the phenomenon of cultural switching in preventive programs for youth and adults.

### **2.2. Research sample**

The research involved 64 people aged 18-49 ( $x = 22.19$ ;  $sd = 5.27$ ), including 43 women, 15 men and 6 people who chose other. All surveyed people have been communicating fluently in English for at least three years. Among the respondents, 36 people indicated that they use a foreign language every day (56.3% of the surveyed group), 18 people use a foreign language several times a week (28.1% of the surveyed group), in turn, 4 people use a foreign language several times a month (6.3% of the surveyed group), and 6 people use it less frequently (9.4% of the group). Of the 64 people surveyed, 39 indicated that in addition to English, they could also communicate in another foreign language.

### 3. Results

Of the 64 surveyed people, 39 feel a change in behavior when using a foreign language (60.9% of the survey group). In turn, 9 people are not sure (14.1% of the group), and 16 participating in the study believe that the type of language used is not related to the intensity of individual behaviors (25% of the group). This difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 23.09$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 1. Noticing changes in behavior depending on the language used

	n	$\chi^2$	p
I notice a change	39		
I'm not sure	9	23.09	<0.001
I don't notice the change	16		

Source: own research

This means that significantly more people feel that their individual behavior changes depending on the language they use. Among the respondents, 29 people indicate that they feel more confident when using a foreign language, and 27 people observe greater ease in expressing emotions. Moreover, 9 participants in the study notice differences in the way of thinking—respondents reason more flexibly when using a foreign language.

Non-verbal communication also differs (gestures, facial expressions, body postures), as many as 49 out of 64 surveyed people notice such a difference, which is a statistically significant result ( $\chi^2 = 54.41$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 2. Noticing changes in one's own nonverbal communication depending on the language used

	n	$\chi^2$	p
I notice a change	49		
I'm not sure	5	54.41	<0.001
I don't notice the change	10		

Source: own research

The question about the source of differences in behaviour was also asked, as many as 47 of the respondents pointed out that changes in behaviour

may result from the structure of the language, while 22 people emphasised the importance of cultural differences that are adopted when using a foreign language, and an additional 38 responses of the respondents indicated adopting the attitudes of people from foreign cultures in interaction, i.e. an attempt to adapt to the interlocutor.

The relationship between the type of foreign language and behavior was also analyzed. Among the 64 people studied, 26 people indicated that each foreign language had a different effect on their current behavior, 23 people were not sure, and 15 participants did not notice any differences in behavior depending on the type of foreign language used. This difference is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.03$ ;  $p = 0.22$ ). Therefore, the type of language used, whether it is English, German or Spanish, does not matter to the respondents, but the interaction in the foreign language itself. Then, the same question was analyzed in a group of 39 people studied, among those who also indicated knowledge of a foreign language other than English. In this case, 20 people noticed that each foreign language had a different effect on their behavior, 13 people were not sure, and 6 did not notice any change. The difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 7.54$ ;  $p = 0.023$ ). The people surveyed who notice differences in their functioning when using a foreign language were asked an open question about the differences they notice. The people surveyed indicated several key topics:

#### 3.1. Increased confidence

One of the respondents states:

*"I am shy when speaking Polish. I am quite confident when speaking English. I am talkative when speaking Spanish".* Another respondent adds: *"I am more adventurous when speaking English, it is easier for me to flirt and joke".*

For another respondent, increased self-confidence is also associated with greater anonymity and freedom:

*"I think that in a foreign language I do not draw as much attention if I say something stupid. I also feel more open. Surprisingly, I also have the impression*

*that my shyness decreases with each passing day when I communicate in a foreign language”.*

### **3.2. Increase in the ease of expressing one’s emotions**

Of the 64 participants, 27 notice differences in the quality of expressing their emotions, as well as understanding the emotions of others. One of the women surveyed states that

*“It is definitely easier for me to open up emotionally in English, I don’t like talking about my feelings in my native language”.*

Another person surveyed notices differences in the level of openness and ease in joking:

*“when I use a foreign language, my sociability, extroversion, and sense of humor become more visible”.*

### **3.3. Increased competence in the area of building relationships with others**

The participant notices greater joy in interacting with others when using a foreign language:

*“when speaking a foreign language, I feel satisfaction from communicating with other people”.*

Similar differences are observed by another person participating in the study:

*“when using a foreign language, I notice a changed approach to the environment, people, and an improvement in mood and more positive emotions”.*

Another of the participants reports an increase in emotional competences concerning understanding her own and other people’s emotions:

*“I adopt behaviors typical of people from a given region, e.g. when speaking French, I feel distinguished and elegant, and when speaking English, I feel open and full of energy”.*

Then, the respondents were asked about their interpretation of the sources of easier expression of emotions in a foreign language and greater self-confidence. As many as 28 respondents indicated a more direct message in a foreign language (especially in English). The Polish language is more formal, which creates distance in interaction (e.g. the formulation “Mr./Mrs.”). In addition, 22 people point out that

the English language is direct, it is easy to express emotions, with single words or short messages, which are often interspersed in today’s Polish language.

In turn, 7 respondents point to a sense of anonymity. While abroad, anonymity makes it easier to express yourself and your emotions.

## **Discussion**

The analyses conducted in the study allowed us to achieve the set goal. There is a connection between using a foreign language and a sense of: increased self-confidence, level of personal competences and building relationships and expressing one’s own emotions. These are key indicators of positive development that are important for life satisfaction, mental resilience, or functioning in various social environments (Abdul Kadir, Mohd, 2021; Bartóg, 2023; Dervishi et al., 2024; Mahadzirah et al., 2014; Orejudo et al., 2021; Shek, Leung, 2013).

Previous studies linking cultural frame switching, foreign language skills, or bilingualism with psychological resources have focused on the relationship between an individual’s self-esteem and foreign language learning, or on the relationship between psychological variables and the quality of foreign language learning (Guban-Caisido, 2020; Rubio, 2021; Wang, Derakhshan, Zhang, 2021). Researchers indicate that psychological variables such as optimism, engagement, mindfulness, and resilience are important for foreign language learning (Derakhshan, 2022). Although there are studies showing the positive consequences of knowing foreign languages for the development of, for example, self-esteem (Guban-Caisido, 2020; Rubio, 2021), there are still few publications focusing on the possibilities of developing the cognitive sphere through foreign languages and thus strengthening the indicators of adaptation to adulthood related to positive development: competence, caring, confidence, connection and character (Bartóg, 2023; Geldhof et al. 2014; Ostaszewski, 2014). Considering that optimism and resilience are conducive to learning foreign languages, it is worth paying attention in subsequent studies to whether the rela-

tionship is bilateral, because the sense of competence that fluent communication in a foreign language gives may be a source of strengthening optimism, mindfulness, or resilience. In the concept of positive development, improving the strengths and potential of an individual is the key to strengthening global psychological resources. Prevention programs in the trend of positive development focus, for example, on sports, where an individual transfers acquired social competences from cooperation with a team to other areas of social functioning (Barlóg, 2023; Holt, 2016; Holt, Deal, Pankow, 2020; Newman et al. 2020). A similar sphere of prevention may be acquiring language competences, which can then be trained in various social interactions, where it is easier for the subjects to express their emotions, feelings, or feel at ease in a foreign language, which is confirmed by the results of the conducted study. It is therefore worth implementing preventive programs in which a foreign language and the phenomenon of switching cultural frames can be used in social interactions, expressing emotions and feelings, gaining self-confidence, or building bonds. It is also important to improve the way a foreign language is taught from the earliest years, in nurseries, kindergartens and schools, so that learning a language is associated with its advantages, and not with the unpleasant obligation of passing a subject in subsequent grades.

This study has several significant limitations. It was conducted on a small sample of 64 people, which, although sufficient to consider the results as

a valuable pilot, requires expansion in further research into this previously underexplored area. The study focuses not so much on the actual development of individual indicators of positive development, but on the sense of their growth in situations where a foreign language is used. However, it is necessary to conduct more extensive research (which would use a battery of reliable tests to measure individual variables), including longitudinal studies that take into account the use of a foreign language as one of the elements of the development program. Such longitudinal studies could provide an answer to the question of whether a regular sense of growth in the analyzed areas of positive development can actually lead to lasting developmental change. Despite limitations such as the lack of use of comprehensive and reliable psychometric tools, the adopted research model seems adequate in the context of pilot studies and initial exploration of the problem. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the applied mixed method allowed for the use of the advantages of both approaches (Malewski, 2023), which makes the study a valuable starting point for further analyses. It is also worth noting that the languages compared were quite culturally close to each other; in the case of cultural switching, a sense of cognitive dissonance or lack of authenticity may appear between two distant cultures (Pope, 2020; West et al. 2018; West et al. 2021).

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