

ANNA SZKOTAK\* – URSZULA ŁĄCZYŃSKA\*\*

**Challenges of bilingual students from Polish diaspora schools – a therapeutic perspective\*\*\***

**ABSTRACT:** This text presents the challenges faced by children from Polish-speaking families living abroad. The first part of the article describes the specificity of bilingualism along with a division and discussion of its various types. Next, it discusses the topics related to the Polish diaspora and the schools attended by children of Polish nationality. Subsequently, the difficulties of bilingual children for whom the language of the host country is the second language are discussed. Problems are mainly considered from the perspective of speech therapy and psychology. Then, the challenges that Polish diaspora schools are trying to meet are described. The text is supported by the authors' many years of experience in working with bilingual students and cooperation with teachers from Polish diaspora schools. The conclusions formulated in the text are based on the experience of the "Flying Clinic" project, which was implemented by the Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad (ORPEG)<sup>1</sup>.

**KEYWORDS:** bilingualism, Polish diaspora schools, Polonia, students' difficulties, speech therapy, psychology, emigration.

---

\* Neuro speech therapist, founded of poradniapolonijna.pl (Polish diaspora clinic), szkotak.anna@gmail.com.

\*\* Former Inspector for the European Schools, urszula.laczynska@gmail.com.

\*\*\* The research and preparation of this study was supported by the Central European Academy.

<sup>1</sup> The "Flying Clinic" is an initiative aimed at enabling access to psychological therapy, speech therapy, physiotherapy, and sensory integration therapy consultations for Polish children living outside the country's borders, who, for various reasons, are encountering difficulties in obtaining such support in their place of residence. This project was implemented both in stationary form (2017, 2018) and online (2020–2023), utilising Internet communication tools, which allowed participants to overcome geographical barriers, and providing support from Polish specialists to families and children located in even the most remote corners of the world.

## **1. Introduction**

Various types of bilingualism have been studied, and it is important to determine whether delineating a boundary between the point where monolingualism ends and bilingualism begins is possible. Is this moment measurable? Linguistic, psychological, and even sociological research lacks a consistent definition regarding bilingualism. Therefore, precisely defining this phenomenon is not simple. Perhaps because bilingualism is always related to a specific person who is operating within a family system, each case is unique and exceptional. Additionally, the paths leading to bilingualism differ, creating one-of-a-kind compositions of languages with representations located in each individual's mind. Therefore, in trying to define bilingualism, it is important to remember that at the beginning of each of these paths stands a person pursuing their own intentions and communicative goals. This process is based on the nature of the individuals involved, including their cognitive abilities, the specifics of their needs and goals, the type of relationships, and the cultural context<sup>2</sup>. The typology of bilingualism presented below is thus simplified and aims to approximate the contemporary trends found in the literature on the subject.

## **2. The phenomenon of bilingualism - basic terms and classifications**

Bilingualism assumes the existence of two linguistic systems in a person's mind. Terms found in the literature such as L1 (from the word 'language') for the first acquired language, then L2, L3, and so on for each subsequent language according to the chronology of language acquisition, do not express the level of linguistic competencies. Other important determinations in the discourse on bilingualism are concepts related to the status of the language such as 'majority language' and 'minority language'. In the context of bilingualism, the minority language is the language used by a minority in a given community. The majority language often refers to the official language of the country, although it can also be the language spoken by a larger part of a community. In the case of the group discussed in this article, children from Polish-speaking families living abroad, the majority language is typically the L2. However, due to exposure and the language of the school system, it becomes the dominant language, often prevailing over Polish.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adamska, 2018, p. 45.

The most common classification of bilingualism in literature is related to the time of acquisition of two linguistic systems and the degree of proficiency in the languages. When discussing bilingualism related to time, we can distinguish types: simultaneous (also known as concurrent) and successive (also known as sequential). Simultaneous bilingualism occurs when a child learns two languages in the same way as learning one language. In an ideal situation, constant and symmetrical exposure to two languages takes place at home, usually from parents or caregivers speaking two languages. This is in contrast to successive bilingualism, when a person begins to learn a second language at any age, most often during school or in adulthood. Exposure to the second language occurs in various contexts, such as school, language courses, or interactions with other users who use the individual's L2 as their L1. Thus, successive bilingualism can describe a situation in which a person begins learning a new language as an adult or as a child who begins to have contact with the second language after mastering basic competencies in the first language<sup>3</sup>.

Another important classification to consider regarding bilingualism is the degree of language mastery. In the literature, we see a division between balanced bilingualism and differentiated bilingualism. In balanced bilingualism, the level of mastery of both languages is the same, whereas differentiated bilingualism is described when one language is mastered at a higher proficiency level<sup>4</sup>. It is worth mentioning that balanced bilingualism is a common theoretical and a kind of ideal towards which one should strive. However, each language serves different functions and is used to achieve different communicative goals. Often, in immigrant families in which a child first masters the minority language (used at home in communication with parents) and then the majority L2 (the environmental language) begins to dominate (usually after starting compulsory education in the majority language), we find unbalanced bilingualism. In such situations, the L2 may even displace the L1<sup>5</sup>. This process is clearly visible in students from Polish-speaking families attending Polish diaspora schools. When considering this group of students, another division arises between 'enriching bilingualism' and 'impoverishing bilingualism'.

Enriching bilingualism is found when there is a strong exposure to the L2 after the L1 is already mastered and both languages develop without any

---

<sup>3</sup> Wodniecka, 2018, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Kurcz, 2005, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Peđrak, 2018, p. 58.

quantitative and qualitative loss<sup>6</sup>. Speech development in each language proceeds according to linguistic norms, meaning the subsequent stages of this development are achieved at the same time as those of their monolingual peers. Impoverishing bilingualism occurs when linguistic competencies in one language give way to those from another language.

To fully approach the phenomenon of bilingualism, it is essential to mention another division distinguishing strategies for childhood acquisition of languages. Researcher Ida Kurcz, who specialises in the psychology of language, divides the strategies into person, place, and time. The person strategy (abbreviated OPOL – one person one language) is when one person speaks to the child only in one language, and another speaks only in the second language. This strategy is usually associated with simultaneous bilingualism. In the place strategy (abbreviated mL@h – minority language at home), the L1 is consistently used at home, and the L2 is spoken in the school environment or amongst peers. Another strategy proposed by the researcher is the time strategy (abbreviated TandP – Time and place). This strategy involves using different languages at certain times or in specific places. At certain times or on certain days, the communication in the child's environment is in L1; at other times, communication is in L2. Given all of the types of bilingualism and strategies involved, the complexity of issues related to multilingualism is clear, and students of Polish diaspora schools abroad face challenges daily.

### **3. Polish diaspora schools – specifics**

#### ***3.1. Polonia - a historical overview***

Understanding Polish diaspora schools requires a deeper insight into the history of Polonia. According to the Polish Language Dictionary, the term Polonia refers to all Poles who have emigrated abroad or were born abroad but maintain Polish traditions, are interested in Polish culture, and show an understanding of Polish matters. These individuals left Poland at different historical periods, most often for political, educational, or economic reasons. The website of the Polish Community Association<sup>7</sup> mentions that the first

---

<sup>6</sup> By quantitative and qualitative losses, the authors of the text refer to the impoverishment of vocabulary and articulatory deficits.

<sup>7</sup> The Polish Community is a non-governmental organisation that supports Poles living outside Poland's borders. It was established in 1990 on the initiative of the Marshal of the Senate of the Republic of Poland of the first term, Prof. Andrzej Stelmachowski.

fully documented centres of Polish activity outside the country's borders could be found in Hungary. In the second decade of the 18th century, a group of highlanders settled in the village of Derenk. The period when Poland was under partitions<sup>8</sup> is referred to by historians as the Great Emigration. During that time, Poles were deprived of their political and economic rights. There were numerous repressions by Russia, leading many Poles to emigrate. Most emigrants from that period settled in France, but they also landed in Great Britain, Switzerland, or Belgium. Amongst the Poles forced to emigrate were supporters of national uprisings, the November and January uprisings, and the May 3<sup>rd</sup> Constitution<sup>9</sup>. Historians agree that the emigration movements during the partitions were significant for the survival of Polishness. Within a country that has lost its independence, it is impossible to conduct political life; hence, political factions were formed outside Poland's borders, where ideas related to Poland's independence were born.

Apart from political centres, cultural centres also played an invaluable role in Polish history. Poets emigrating to France, such as Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, created works that are still amongst the most important elements of Polish national culture today. These poems touch on themes of freedom, independence, and patriotism, uplifting the spirits of Poles and giving them strength and faith in regaining independence. When considering the work of Poles in emigration, Fryderyk Chopin, who created his most famous pieces while in emigration, is also worth mentioning.

The next wave of emigration is related to the industrial revolution. While industries and cities were developing in other parts of the world, the situation of peasants in Poland, who had lost their lands, was very difficult. Their main destination for emigration was the United States. The main population who emigrated comprised the poor rural residents of the Russian partition and Galicia<sup>10</sup>. Initially, their emigration was supposed to have a seasonal character; the emigrants wanted to earn money to buy land in their

---

<sup>8</sup> The partitions of Poland refer to three historical events, as a result of which in the years 1772, 1793, and 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided among three neighboring states: Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

<sup>9</sup> The May 3<sup>rd</sup> Constitution, officially the Government Act of May 3, 1791, is a law that was enacted on May 3, 1791, regulating the legal system of the hereditary monarchy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It is commonly accepted that the May 3<sup>rd</sup> Constitution was the first in Europe and the second written constitution in the world.

<sup>10</sup> Galicia – the colloquial name for the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under Austrian partition from 1772 to 1918.

homeland, thus improving their social status. However, after settling in the United States, most of them acclimatised, stayed permanently, and brought their families and friends to their new country.

It is difficult to talk about economic emigration during the time of World War II. People's movements beyond the borders were related to war or political actions. There were numerous displacements, deportations, political emigrations, and reemigrations. The period after World War II, when Poland became a country under the influence of the USSR, is when the communist authorities repressed Poles who were opposed to their rule. As a result of these repressions, many Poles decided to leave the country. Emigration was the only option for them to avoid repression and maintain freedom. In 1989, when systemic changes occurred in Poland, many Poles decided to leave the country in search of better living conditions, work, and development opportunities. However, the largest wave of emigration is considered to be in 2004, when Poland joined the European Union. Thus, the history of Polonia is closely related to the turbulent fate of Poland. Undoubtedly, it is a highly diverse community, coming from various environments and possessing diverse experiences and motives related to their decision to leave the country. It is also important to remember this context when considering Polish diaspora schools. Differences in values and priorities are significant in the context of each school's approach to education.

### ***3.2. Polish schools abroad - characteristics***

The broader concept of Polish diaspora schools introduced for the purposes of this text requires clarification. In the literature and Polish legislation, there is a distinction between three types of schools: Polish schools, Polish diaspora schools, and Polish sections in European schools, which were established based on an international treaty signed by the member states of the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom). The main purpose of these schools is to provide education for the children of employees of European institutions. The first treaty establishing the European Schools was signed on 12 April 1957, in Luxembourg, creating the legal foundation for the creation of additional schools of this type. An updated version of the treaty, known as the Convention Defining the Statute of the European Schools, was signed on 21 June 1994 and came into force on 1 October 1 2002. This convention

regulates the structure, organisation, and operational principles of the European Schools.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout this text, when referring to Polish diaspora schools, we are referring to the broad concept that includes all three types mentioned above. Polish schools are operated by Polish diplomatic missions. They belong to the structure of the Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad (ORPEG). Polish schools implement a supplementary programme in which students learn the Polish language and acquire general knowledge about the world. According to information available on the ORPEG website<sup>12</sup>, in the 2023/2023 school year, 74 such schools were functioning on four continents (Europe, Africa, North America, and Asia), where 16,000 students had begun their education. Currently, 600 teachers are employed in Polish schools. Polish diaspora schools, unlike Polish schools, are run by social organisations, parishes, and other educational institutions conducting Polish language teaching abroad. Their main goal is to improve students' language skills and familiarise them with the Polish culture. The Polish language is also taught in European schools, which are official institutions controlled by the governments of the member states of the European Union. These schools are intended for children whose parents are employed in the institutions and agencies of the European Union. According to ORPEG data, in the 2023/2024 school year, over 800 Polish students were taught in European schools, and 47 teachers were sent to Europe from Poland to work.

To better understand what a Polish diaspora school is in its broader sense, it seems reasonable to make another distinction between a language school and a Polish diaspora school. Both cases manage acquiring the Polish language in a mixed/sequential manner. A Polish diaspora school is a Polish school abroad attended by children and youth of Polish origin. In addition to developing language skills, they also acquire knowledge in the fields of history and knowledge about Poland. The goal of such schools is to maintain and develop the cultural and linguistic identity of Polonia. The position that the Polish language is acquired here in a mixed manner is

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Convention defining the Statute of the European Schools', signed 21 June 1994 and entered into force 1 October 2002, [Online]. Available at: [www.eursec.eu](http://www.eursec.eu); Basic texts - European Schools (Accessed: 15 January 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad (2023 January 20). Basic information, [Online]. Available at: <https://www.orpeg.pl/o-nas/podstawowe-informacje/> (Accessed: 15 January 2024).

supported by the fact that often, in the case of Polish diaspora children, they have greater exposure to the language of the host country. This refers to the local educational system, extracurricular activities, and peer groups. The Polish language is mainly used at home, after school, and in Polish school. A language school, on the other hand, is an institution offering foreign language learning; in our case, the students are learning the Polish language. The school aims to develop competencies in a foreign language. In addition to teaching the Polish language, language schools usually offer courses in other languages for people of various ages and levels of engagement. They can be run by private entities or public institutions. Various methods and teaching techniques are used for foreign language learning, the choice of which depends on factors such as age, level of advancement, and course objectives. This way of acquiring the Polish language is also considered mixed. In a language school, to assign a student to a class or appropriate level, language tests are conducted to ensure teaching comfort, select appropriate methods, and provide a measurable starting point in the teaching process. In a Polish diaspora school, the deciding factor for the class is almost always the student's age. This has consequences for the varied level of Polish language present in the class, which often poses a challenge for teachers who are obligated to implement the curriculum. It also leads to frustration amongst students whose language competencies are insufficient to freely express themselves during lessons on a given topic.

#### **4. Challenges for Polish diaspora school students**

The challenges faced by students in Polish diaspora schools abroad are presented based on experiences and conclusions from 5 editions of the “Flying Clinic” project, which was implemented by the Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad from 2017 to 2023, and experiences in running the “Polonia Clinic”<sup>13</sup>. The Polonia Clinic is registered as an association in Poland. An association is a form of non-governmental organisation that operates for the benefit of the community, in this case, the Polish community, offering therapeutic support for the Polish diaspora.

---

<sup>13</sup> The “Polonia Clinic” was founded by the author with the aim of assisting families in accessing specialists experienced in working with bilingual children who need therapeutic support but, for various reasons, do not have access to it, [Online]. Available at: [www.poradniapolonijna.pl](http://www.poradniapolonijna.pl) (Accessed: 20 January 2024).



The process of registering an association in Poland begins with a founding meeting, where a group of at least 15 people adopt a resolution to establish the association. During this meeting, the statute, which is the fundamental document regulating the association's activities, is also adopted. The statute defines the name, headquarters, goals, and operating principles of the association as well as the rights and obligations of its members.

The next step is to submit the association to the National Court Register (KRS). The registration application is submitted to the appropriate registration court along with the required documents, such as the resolution to establish the association, the statute, the list of founders with their signatures, and the resolution to appoint the association's bodies (e.g. the board, the audit committee). The registration court reviews the application and makes a decision on the entry into the register. If there are any formal deficiencies, the applicants are called upon to supplement them. After the application is positively reviewed, the association receives a KRS number, which is a unique identifier for the organisation.

After registration with the KRS, the association must register with the tax office to obtain a tax identification number (NIP) and a statistical number (REGON). The association can then start operating in accordance with its adopted statute, achieving its goals and objectives. The association is also required to maintain accounting records and submit financial and substantive reports in accordance with legal regulations.

Registering an association in Poland is a formal process that requires diligence and compliance with specific legal regulations. This ensures that the association can legally operate and achieve its goals for the benefit of the community.

As part of the "Flying Clinic", 2,817 consultations were conducted, and the following conclusions were formulated in relation to them. The main goal of the project was to conduct speech therapy, psychological, and sensory integration consultations<sup>14</sup> for students identified by teachers using technological tools. Online meetings aimed to preliminarily recognise the needs of students and provide guidance for parents and teachers by preparing recommendations for further therapeutic work. The project

---

<sup>14</sup> The authors wish to emphasise the deliberate use of the word 'consultation' rather than 'examination'. In the authors' view, using the word 'examination' in the context of remote contact is incorrect and inconsistent with the practice of the speech therapy and psychology professions.

consulted students who exhibited general developmental difficulties and students whose development worried parents or teachers. Most often, these students did not have the opportunity for such a consultation in the host country due to restricted access to local specialists and the lack of specialists working in the Polish language and communication difficulties of parents. The idea of the meetings was to apply therapeutic intervention as early as possible. The students' conduct required specialists to have a thorough knowledge about their place of origin and cultural context. The places of residence of the students, and thus the systems in which they operate daily, differed significantly amongst participants. The consultations included students from schools scattered across continents including as Europe, Africa, North America, and Asia.

A typical online speech therapy consultation lasts about 60 minutes and is preceded by an interview that the parent completes. The interview covers the child's speech development, linguistic situation, and health condition. During the consultation, the level of Polish in spontaneous speech is assessed; it is also evaluated through an articulation test. The functionality of the articulatory organs and auditory functions are also checked. Meanwhile, the psychological consultation consists of three meetings. The first meeting with the parents usually lasts from 45 to 60 minutes and allows for the gathering of a wide range of information about the child and the family. The second meeting, which is a direct conversation with the child, may last a similar duration, though it is usually slightly shorter and dependent on the child's age and attention span, often ranging between 30 and 45 minutes. The third meeting with the parents, aimed at discussing observations and determining further steps, also typically lasts about 45 minutes.

#### ***4.1. Language challenges***

##### **4.1.1. Specifics of assessing the language development level of bilingual students**

Examining the language competencies of multilingual students is a challenge for speech therapists. Both diagnosing the level of language development and determining possible areas and levels of language disorders in a bilingual person are difficult due to a dearth of literature,

courses, and workshops<sup>15</sup>. The number of factors that can affect the communication picture of bilingual children often makes them susceptible to incorrect, and sometimes even harmful, speech therapy diagnoses. Therefore, when conducting therapy or examining a multilingual child, it is always extremely important to be cautious before formulating far-reaching, unjust conclusions. On one hand, it is possible to opine that a child has delayed speech development, often attributed to developmental delay; on the other hand, one might fall into the trap of not recognising language disorders in a bilingual person.

The consulted children from Polish-speaking families living abroad differed from each other in the way they acquired multilingualism, the level of knowledge of the Polish language, and how intense their contact with the local language was. Since the development of multilingual children does not proceed in precisely the same way as the development of monolingual individuals, most often, research tools intended for monolingual students during the examination may lead to a type-one error, whereas not using standardised tests and relying solely on one's knowledge can lead to a type-two error<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, when examining the language competencies of multilingual students, it is crucial to consider whether the lower language level or language phenomena deviating from the norm can be explained by too little exposure to the Polish language or whether it might be the result of a developmental disorder. It should always be remembered that language communication disorders in bilingual children are discussed only when deficits are observed in both languages. For this reason, it is necessary to apply a strategy that also allows consideration of the level of competencies in the second language. The latest recommendations indicate three possibilities:

- If the diagnosing therapist does not know the child's second language, having a translator present during the consultation is recommended;
- if for some reason it is impossible to learn about the level of competencies in L2, the therapist is advised to contact the school for detailed information on this matter;
- the third possibility is a detailed interview with the parent.

---

<sup>15</sup> Czaplewska, 2018, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 179.

It should be remembered, however, that the last two options are not precise and may be subjective. Due to the limitations of the project and its framework, the consulting specialists relied on the third possibility.

Currently, no standardised tools are available for diagnosing multilingual individuals; there is a lack of tools that would allow the examination of a child's competencies within different languages and compare the obtained results<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the online speech therapy consultations, which the author conducts professionally, and those conducted as part of the "Flying Clinic" project, are based on currently available knowledge. The key to making accurate conclusions is undoubtedly a detailed interview with parents covering questions not only about the child's development of the Polish language but also about the second language in which the child communicates. The interview concerns the child's language situation, the biological conditions of their speech development, and their overall development. It should provide information on how often the child is in contact with a given language and whether it is rich and correct in its form. The structure of the meeting does not differ from that with a monolingual child; however, determining the level of language and communication competencies in each language is important. When identifying the causes of observed difficulties, in addition to considering developmental factors, it is also necessary to recognise the possible impact of cultural-social-linguistic factors in relation to both languages, for example, by determining whether the stimulation of the development of both languages is appropriate, age-appropriate, and adequate to the child's abilities<sup>18</sup>. Assessing basic communication skills, which are not culturally and linguistically conditioned, is also necessary. These include, amongst others, imitation, eye contact, communication intention, the ability to build a shared attention field, play development, and the ability to notice a communication partner. Another area being tested is language skills such as repeating sounds (babbling, imitative babbling), development of understanding (responding to names of people and objects), and the development of language structures - building a language system, which depends on all the above-mentioned factors<sup>19</sup>. During online consultations with a child, attempts are made to establish emotional contact and recognise the child's general communicative behaviours. During the

---

<sup>17</sup> Kurowska, 2021, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Korendo, 2019, p. 20.

conversation, a proprietary tool for speech examination is used.<sup>20</sup> This tool consists of sections allowing for the assessment of articulation, the structure and efficiency of articulatory organs, the ability to pragmatically use the Polish language, inflection, and the narrative structure as well as the ability to use present, future, and past tenses. It also allows for the determination of skills such as auditory memory and auditory concentration. Reading and writing skills are also tested by obtaining a text sample.

#### 4.1.2. Most common language difficulties

Difficulties of a speech therapy and linguistic nature constituted the largest percentage of reported issues. Often, these issues had their source in inconsistently conducted bilingualism because parents do not always have knowledge on the subject. During numerous consultations, participants reported that, in many countries, they receive advice from local teachers and speech therapists that they should stop speaking to their children in Polish to ensure their success in the local school. This often leads to submersion, that is, the absorption of L1 by L2.

For the vast majority of students consulted for speech therapy, articulatory abnormalities were present. The key role in the process of forming the phonetic-phonological system in a bilingual child is played by perceptual processes. A child who acquires two language systems must master the ability to differentiate a larger number of phonemes than their monolingual peers. In students from Polish diaspora schools, the ability to isolate and identify phonological elements is impaired. They must learn to distinguish two sets of sounds and phonetic rules, which can lead to difficulties in auditory information processing. Reflections of this situation are difficulties with the pronunciation of some phonemes that characteristic of the Polish language ([ɕ], [ʂ], [z], [d͡z]). These phonemes are considered difficult articulatorily because their correct realisation requires skills such as vertical positioning of the tongue, motor efficiency of its tip, and proper rounding of the lips. Consulting speech therapists tried to answer whether

---

<sup>20</sup> Norms established for monolingual children do not allow for determining the language development level of bilingual children; some recommend adopting more lenient diagnostic criteria (Czaplewska, 2018, p.45). Consequently, for diagnostic purposes, a tool for assessing the level of competence in the Polish language has been developed by Prof. M. Michalik from the Pedagogical University in Krakow and A. Szkotak, a neurospeech therapist and the author of this text.

the mentioned difficulties are a speech defect or a mistake, whose cause lies in language transfer, that is, a situation where a student replaces a phoneme from one language system with a phoneme from another. Their task was to find the cause of the articulatory difficulties. Were they caused by the influence of L2 on L1, or if the student had been a monolingual child, would the specific phonemes also constitute a problem? In many cases, the difficulties were not coupled with bilingualism. Often, the incorrect realisation of phonemes was due to organic causes such as improper functioning of the orbicularis oris muscle, lowered tongue activity, enlarged palatine tonsils, or a short lingual frenulum. In many cases, prior to the consultation, parents were unaware of these abnormalities, attributing unclear speech to bilingualism.

Another group of difficulties encountered by the consulted students were related to dyslexia. From a speech therapy perspective, this is a language communication disorder. It is indeed a disorder of written communication, in that its conditions are often closely related to a disorder or delay in the development of speech in a child - disrupted mastery of competencies and language skills, especially phonological-phonetic, but also morphological, lexical, or syntactic and related to text structure. Symptoms of dyslexia include disturbances in reading functions in terms of technique, pace, correctness, and understanding of the read text, disturbances in spelling and punctuation correctness, and disturbances in the correctness of writing, graphically<sup>21</sup>. Thus, we see how strongly these skills are coupled with language skills. These specific difficulties, which hinder a child from learning to read and write, are often not noticed and diagnosed in the target population before they meet with Polish-speaking specialists. They are frequently explained by the child's bilingualism, thus perpetuating myths about the impact of bilingualism on lowering the level of language competencies of students. Students did not receive support in this area in local schools, which only deepened their problem, causing frustration amongst students, in the school environment, and in families.

It is also worth noting that many of the students had problems with auditory processing disorders. Interestingly, these were often caused by otolaryngological episodes in the past. According to recommendations by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association<sup>22</sup>, auditory processing disorders are discussed when at least one of the basic higher auditory

---

<sup>21</sup> Bogdanowicz, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> ASHA, 2005.

functions is disturbed. The symptoms of these disorders include difficulties such as: locating the source of the sound, differentiating sounds, recognising sound patterns, and analysing the temporal aspects of the sound signal including temporal resolution, temporal integration, perception of sound order, ability to understand distorted speech, and ability to understand speech in noise<sup>23</sup>. For students, this translates into an inability to properly receive verbal information in classroom conditions, and therefore impacts educational achievements. For students from Polish diaspora schools, the issue is more complex, as their exposure and the need to switch between different linguistic systems requires even more effort. Students participating in this study had not previously received appropriate help in the host country. Despite their difficulties, they had not been previously referred for additional diagnostics to determine the causes of the difficulties and engage in therapeutic actions that could contribute to improving their auditory functioning. In interviews with parents, it often emerged that the students' hearing difficulties were interpreted as a problem resulting from bilingualism, thereby closing the path to further diagnostics.

## **5. Psychological challenges**

### ***5.1. Characteristics of psychological consultations in bilingual children***

The psychological assessment of a student who operates daily in two language spaces differs from that of a student who uses one language. Differences can be seen at the level of the mind of a multilingual person, which is increasingly understood to function differently because it undergoes specific training. Both language systems of bilingual people are continuously active, and word representations constantly compete with each other. As a result, a multilingual person engages a mechanism to control the activation of both language systems that allows for the use of each of them in the appropriate context<sup>24</sup>. However, according to the latest research on the impact of bilingualism on cognitive control functioning, it cannot be treated as a binary. Differences in brain functioning and structural changes do not result from the mere classification of a person as bilingual but from a combination of experiences related to bilingualism. Thus, the entire experience of bilingualism causes neuroplastic changes in the brain that

---

<sup>23</sup> Kurkowski, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Wodniecka, 2018, p. 69.

translate both into language functioning and general cognitive control<sup>25</sup>. This entire experience of bilingualism is precisely what formed the basis of the psychological consultations.

The socio-cultural diversity of students participating in the project was obvious. Most of them spent part of their day functioning in the language and culture prevailing in Poland, and the other part of the day, in addition to being in a different language system, they were often in a different culture. Therefore, psychologists needed to consider the cultural context of each family during consultations. The specifics of culture are associated, amongst others, with different rules of entering into interactions. As a result, the same behaviour in people from different cultures may be a manifestation of completely different factors<sup>26</sup>. The people conducting the psychological consultations, in addition to knowledge of psychometrics and experience in applying various techniques for checking and describing cognitive and social skills, were required to possess cultural competencies. Therefore, following Stamplewska-Żakowicz<sup>27</sup>, they identified the socio-cultural background from which the students came, recognised how cultural conditions could influence relationships with students, and were attentive to the recognition of their own beliefs, stereotypes, and prejudices towards culturally different individuals.

Cultural differences could also affect the dynamics of contact; in online consultations, without the possibility of face-to-face contact, additional difficulties arise. With this in mind, during the consultation, before formulating a report with recommendations, psychologists attended to issues such as the child's age, the period of exposure to languages, family environment, language skills, cognitive development, social development, and emotional development. These are considered psychological variables that are independent of culture. The consultants chose their material in such a way that it was not dependent on experiences specific to only one developmental environment, in this case, culture. Consulting specialists also paid attention to the fact that the way of establishing contact with another person is closely related to the rules prevailing in a given culture. Students socialising within traditional ethnic communities display behaviours indicating respect for the authority of the consulting specialist, striving to perform all his instructions, even when they are unable to understand the

---

<sup>25</sup> Wolna, 2022, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> Barzykowski, Durlik-Marcinowska and Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2018, p. 201.

<sup>27</sup> 2011.



command or when they will perceive it as senseless actions. A different type of contact in the specialist–student relationship occurs in a meeting with a child brought up within modern culture. In this case, strongly intensified individualism can be seen, and children show a tendency to ask a large number of questions and are likely to provide considerable information focused on themselves or refuse to provide any information at all<sup>28</sup>.

Consultation within the “Polonia Clinic” focused on a screening assessment of the child’s cognitive and socio-emotional functioning, taking into account specific difficulties reported by guardians. Interviews were conducted remotely and separately: with parents and with the child independently. In the case of children younger than 7 years of age or reluctant to have independent contact, interviews were conducted in the presence and with the help of parents. Additionally, responses from an online socio-demographic survey and questionnaires prepared for the study by specialists supporting the assessment of the child’s functioning and serving to get to know the characteristics of parental care, were also employed. After the consultation, parents received a report with an analysis of the child’s functioning assessment along with recommendations for further action regarding the child and the parents themselves: psychoeducational, diagnostic, therapeutic, or even medical. For some of the examined participants, a repetition of the psychological assessment after one year, that is, during the next implementation of the “Flying Clinic” project, was planned.

### **5.2. Most common psychological challenges**

Amongst the most frequently mentioned reasons for which families sought psychological consultations were stress, problems with self-regulation, difficulties in social relationships, depressive disorders, and parenting difficulties. In the issue of child migration as a whole, stress is an important issue. Children, like their parents, have different ways of managing such stress. Stress accompanies each person in every life stage. Students encounter stress whenever the activities they perform violate the body’s balance or disrupt the normal course of daily behaviours. Even a small change in the external environment or in the organism evokes a state of internal anxiety, irritation. Stress tends to grow quickly and is transferred to

---

<sup>28</sup> “Traditional ethnic community” or “modern culture” for the diagnosed children and their differences signifies the cultural diversity and type of tradition in upbringing (Barzykowski, Durlik-Marcinowska and Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2018).

various life situations. In such cases, it is assessed negatively, as stressful events tend to accumulate, causing unquestionable changes in the organism, disrupting behaviour<sup>29</sup>. Chronic stress often leads to negative consequences affecting the child's physical and mental health, disrupting the process of assimilating knowledge and affecting memory. Reports resulting from psychological consultations clarify that the most frequently mentioned difficulties parents report from stress are sleep problems, concentration problems, hyperactivity, and digestive problems and headaches. The stress level is also undoubtedly related to the ability to self-regulate, that is, the ability to control one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. It is an important developmental skill, as it allows us to achieve our goals, manage stress, and build relationships with others. It develops gradually throughout life, but its foundations are laid in childhood. Difficulties associated with self-regulation were often brought up by parents in conversations with psychologists.

Another group of problems reported by parents were difficulties with social relationships. Such problems included individual differences amongst students, cultural differences, emotional difficulties, developmental disorders, and incorrect developmental patterns resulting from the student's social situation. The most frequently reported difficulties with social relationships included social isolation, feeling rejected by peers, aggressive behaviours, and social withdrawal. These difficulties seem to be common to the general population of contemporary students and are an integral part of adolescence regardless of issues related to bilingualism or migration. However, it is worth noting that students who face problems with languages (L1 or L2) indicated in conversations with psychologists that they feel worse than their majority-culture peers. They reported difficulties with understanding jokes, slang, and other aspects of colloquial language, which made them withdraw and feel excluded from the group.

Another visible category of difficulties is depression. A substantial part of the project took place in the years 2020–2022, that is, during the period of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Project participants clearly emphasised that the pandemic had changed everyday and school life. The necessity of social isolation, the long-term stay with the entire family at home, the limitation of activities, and remote education intensified symptoms of depression in children and adolescents. It should be noted here

---

<sup>29</sup> Korczyński.

that in many cases, families did not know how to manage this problem, as they did not have access to Polish-speaking specialists<sup>30</sup>.

For the next category of difficulties that families raised, cultural differences in the process of raising children are important. Social norms and values are not universal for all countries. Often, Polish parents' parenting styles differ from their peers' styles in the host country. This can constitute a source of conflicts, especially in the context of growing children. Parents have difficulty, for obvious reasons, with adopting ways to convey social norms present in the cultures of the countries to which they emigrated. Using old patterns causes cognitive dissonance. The child must choose between the rules of coexistence found in the environment and the commands of the parents<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, parenting difficulties are certainly influenced by language differences. In many cases, among emigrating families, the children have acquired the host country language at a higher level than the parents. This can lead to the destabilisation of certain norms and affect the way a student perceives their parents, who should be an authority for them, in language and in life. Even mastery of the host country language does not always provide parents with the opportunity to use the language to convey abstract contents related to values or religious experiences<sup>32</sup>. When a child has higher language competencies in the host country, and their native language remains at a certain level, mutual understanding can be difficult. This can contribute to the parenting difficulties reported by parents.

Another challenge facing students of Polish-speaking schools is their difficulties with attention concentration. Concentration is an essential cognitive skill that allows us to focus on one activity and persist in it. Difficulties in this area can lead to difficulty in learning, performing tasks, and building relationships with others. In particular, the basis of relationships are sought in language. In some cases, consulting psychologists observed a relationship between the functioning of students in two linguistic systems and attention concentration. They assumed that the necessity of switching between two languages constitutes a source of effort for students and leads to attention dispersion. Moreover, among many of the students of the Polish diaspora schools, knowledge of one of the languages

---

<sup>30</sup> In many of the consulted families, the level of acquisition of the host country's language was insufficient to be able to benefit from the assistance of a local therapist.

<sup>31</sup> Cieszyńska, 2022, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

is limited. This can result in misunderstanding of instructions, which also leads to attention dispersion.

Intellectual helplessness is an important concept in the context of psychological consultations<sup>33</sup>. This refers to a state that denotes a permanent change in behaviour, as a result of which the individual ceases to make efforts even when something is possible. This issue can be found in various spheres of life; for the purposes of this study, we are referring to education. Students may put forth considerable intellectual effort with no possibility of influencing the course of events because attempts to master new material do not bring about the expected results. For bilingual children, linguistically difficult material and a lack of progress in solving problems despite intense intellectual effort can lead to cognitive exhaustion including a deterioration of performance in complex tasks, a loss of creativity and intrinsic motivation, that is, a denial of what bilingual education for children should be<sup>34</sup>. This phenomenon is accompanied by frustration resulting from a disproportionately large amount of work in relation to the learning outcomes of the child. Thus, psychological consultations highlighted difficulties of students from Polish diaspora schools in social contacts, difficulties in the area of self-regulation and coping with stress, parenting difficulties, and difficulties in the attentional area. Consulting therapists, in their reports, tried to support families by providing tips and indicating therapeutic actions. Some of the psychological difficulties were strongly connected with language competencies.

## 6. Summary

Given the characteristics of modernity and changes in the functioning of young people, schools are increasingly becoming the main place for children and teenagers to meet their peers. Polish diaspora schools bear even greater responsibility, as often, apart from family members, they provide the only exposure to the Polish language and the chance to build peer relationships in this language. Time spent with peers thus satisfies many important needs, and the school becomes a space where students acquire extremely important skills. Therefore, it is worth looking for ways to provide the time and opportunity to build good relationships. Additionally, unbalanced bilingualism and asymmetrical exposure to the Polish language

---

<sup>33</sup> Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2023, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

can cause students to be reluctant to learn in Saturday school and entail a heavy burden. During numerous meetings, teachers from Polish diaspora schools unequivocally stated that they are unable to offer psychological-pedagogical support due to the lack of access to Polish-speaking specialists with whom teachers could co-operate. As a result, children's difficulties and deficits are not diagnosed, and thus, therapeutic interventions are not implemented. Unfortunately, in many countries, local specialists whom parents or teachers from Polish schools meet often trivialise the reported problems, attributing them to the child's bilingualism. Every year, more students are found with developmental difficulties and attention problems in addition to language difficulties. Thus, there is a visible group of students who need therapeutic support that teachers are unable to provide, which consequently leads to frustration and professional burnout. Due to the varied level of Polish language among students learning in Polish diaspora schools, teachers' work on implementing the curriculum is often impossible. Students sometimes do not understand instructions and do not actively participate in the lesson, leading to frustration on both sides. These students are then reluctant to go to the Polish school, which can generate additional tension in families. Such highly diversified classes can also lead to professional burnout among teachers. They must, within one class, adjust their methods to numerous groups of students, often making them feel helpless and isolated in the face of their difficulties. Thus, it is clear that, due to numerous therapeutic challenges faced by students and teachers of Polish diaspora schools, solutions need to be introduced.

Introducing certain changes in the Polish diaspora education system that would ensure that teachers are properly prepared to work with students of varied levels of Polish language proficiency seems reasonable. It is necessary to increase extracurricular support for teachers, parents, and children. Above all, students from Polish diaspora schools should be guaranteed access to Polish-speaking psychologists and speech therapists who have basic skills in supporting multilingual students. Additionally, introducing mandatory training for teachers related to methods of teaching Polish as a foreign language is advisable. This training should cover issues related to teaching students of varied levels of advancement as well as methods of working with students with various motivations for learning Polish. It also seems reasonable to create a formal support network for teachers teaching in Polish diaspora schools. This network could include the possibility of exchanging experiences between teachers and therapists and

providing access to materials and educational tools, peer supervision, and support and the possibility of consultations and psychological support for teachers. Support for teachers and students in Polish diaspora schools abroad is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of Polish diaspora education. These steps are important so that these schools can become places where students want to learn and develop as well as build ties with the Polish culture and language. To achieve this goal, there can be no place for feeling alienated and misunderstood. Therefore, it is extremely important for schools to create conditions conducive to integration. Beyond implementing the curriculum, they should conduct activities that allow students to get to know each other and build bonds. Psychological support should also be available for students' parents, who are often the main people supporting students in learning Polish. Support for the parents can help them manage their own emotions and problems and also provide necessary support to their children.

In summary, children in Polish diaspora schools face many challenges, both educational and psychological. To ensure the best conditions for their learning and development, Polish diaspora schools should offer therapeutic support, create conditions conducive to integration, and have help in adapting their teaching programmes to the needs of individual students.

**Bibliography**

- [1] Adamska, K. (2018) 'Cultural differences and interpersonal communication', in Czaplewska, E. (ed.) *Intercultural Logopedics, Logopedics of the 21st Century*. Gdańsk: Harmonia Universalis, pp. 40-61.
- [2] Barzykowski, K., Durlik-Marcinowska, J., Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H. (2018) 'The role and significance of cultural and linguistic diversity in the diagnostic process. Selected issues', in Czaplewska, E. (ed.) *Intercultural Speech Therapy*. Gdańsk: Harmonia Universalis, pp. 176-208.
- [3] Cieszyńska, J. (2002) *Bilingualism and biculturalism - a curse or a treasure? On the search for identity of Poles in Austria*. Kraków: Akademia Pedagogiczna Publishing.
- [4] Czaplewska, E. (2022) The role of speech therapy in contemporary multicultural societies, *Logopeda*, 54(4), pp. 37-49.
- [5] Czaplewska, E. (ed.) (2018) *Intercultural Speech Therapy*. Gdańsk: Harmonia Universalis, pp. 40-61.
- [6] Czaplewska, E. (ed.). (2018) 'The role of speech therapy in contemporary multicultural societies' in: Czaplewska, E. (ed.) *Intercultural Speech Therapy*. Gdańsk: Harmonia Universalis, pp. 261- 288.
- [7] Editorial team of LOGO Zone (2023) 'Bilingualism in children in speech therapy practice', *LOGO Zone*, pp. 20-25.
- [8] Gudykunst, W. B., Kim, Y. Y. (2016) *Intercultural Communication: An Intercultural Perspective*. (7th ed.), Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

- [9] Korendo, M., Błasiak-Tytuła, M. (2019) 'Assessment of speech development in bilingual children – the importance of early diagnosis for the identification and therapy of disorders', *Poznań Studies in Polish Linguistics. Linguistic Series*, 26(46), 2, pp. 7-19.
- [10] Krakowiak, K. (ed.) (2017) *Diagnosis of Special Developmental and Educational Needs of Children and Youth*. Warsaw: Centre for Education Development.
- [11] Kurcz, I. (2005) *Psychology of Language*. (2nd edition), Warsaw: PWN Publishing.
- [12] Kurkowski, Z. M. (2013) *Audiogenic Conditions of Language Communication Disorders*. Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.
- [13] Kurowska, M. (2021) 'Establishing the Standard of Speech Therapy Diagnostic Procedures in Bilingual Children – Conditions and Challenges', in *Poradnik Językowy*. Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press.
- [14] Lipińska, E., Seretny, A. (2012) 'Polish diaspora school or language school? Polish diaspora education from a didactic perspective', *Migration Studies - Review of Polish Diaspora*, 38(4), pp. 23-37.
- [15] Łopata, A., Zawadzka, M. (2022) 'Central auditory processing disorders and learning problems in second-grade elementary school students', *New Audiophonology*, 25(3), pp. 11-20.
- [16] Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, A. (2023) 'Multilingual students: where is their place in Polish school?' *Foreign Languages in School*, 3(2), pp. 19-28.
- [17] Pędrak, A. (2018) 'The multidimensionality of children's bilingualism (in the context of emigration)', *Society. Education. Language*, 7(12), pp. 507-544.



- 
- [18] Wolna, A., Wodniecka, Z. (2022) ‘Bilingual brain: a review of the most important findings’, *Neuropsychiatry and Neuropsychology*, 17(1-2), pp. 66–73.
- [19] PWN (2022) ‘Emigration’ in *Great Dictionary of the Polish Language*. 2nd ed., Vol. 5, Warsaw: PWN Publishing, pp. 104-108.
- [20] Search [Online], (n.d.). Komlogo. Available at: <https://www.komlogo.pl/encyklopedia-szukaj?q=dysleksja> (Accessed: 24 January 2024).