**International Journal of Education and Humanities (IJEH), 5(4) 2025:740-750**
http://i-jeh.com/index.php/ijeh/index
E-ISSN: 2798-5768

# A Dynamic CiteSpace Analysis of Research on Foreign Language Effect Abroad

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**Abstract**

Research on the foreign language effect—how using a non-native language influences cognition and decision-making—has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. However, there is still limited comprehensive mapping of its development trajectory and thematic evolution on a global scale. This study aims to investigate the research trends, knowledge structures, and emerging hotspots in the field of foreign language effects over the past decade. Utilizing CiteSpace visual analysis software, the study analyzes articles indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection from 2013 to 2023. The analysis focuses on the annual publication trends, geographical distribution of research output, co-citation networks, and keyword clustering. Results indicate a general upward trend in the number of publications, despite fluctuations across years. The dominant research themes revolve around moral psychology, reduced emotionality, dishonesty, and decision-making. The United States, Europe, and East Asia appear as major contributors to this field. These findings suggest that while the foreign language effect has become a prominent interdisciplinary topic, its development in China remains comparatively limited. The study underscores the need to strengthen theoretical frameworks, adopt advanced digital tools such as visual analytics, expand interdisciplinary integration, and deepen empirical exploration within the Chinese context. These implications can inform future research directions and policy decisions aimed at enhancing foreign language education and psychological studies in multilingual settings.

**Keywords**: *CiteSpace, Foreign language effect, Visual analysis.*

## A. Introduction

With the development of economic globalization, the connections between countries around the world are becoming increasingly close. People from different countries and regions not only communicate in their native languages but also rely on foreign languages for cross-border negotiations, collaborations, and academic exchange. Currently, more than half of the world's population is bilingual (Ansaldo et al., 2008), and multilingual capabilities are widely used in domains such as scientific research, economic and trade exchanges, and intercultural communication. This linguistic adaptability raises important questions: to what extent does using a foreign language influence cognitive processing, moral reasoning, and decision-making?

Recent research shows that learning and using a foreign language can significantly influence cognitive mechanisms, particularly by enhancing cognitive control and promoting rationality in decision-making processes (McFarlane et al., 2020). Studies suggest that bilingual individuals are more likely to assess risks more objectively (Keysar et al., 2012), opt for utilitarian solutions in moral dilemmas (Costa, Foucart, Hayakawa et al., 2014), and provide more accurate self-assessments (Ivaz et al., 2019). These shifts in cognition when operating in a foreign language are collectively referred to as the "foreign language effect." This phenomenon has attracted increasing attention in the fields of psychology, linguistics, and decision sciences due to its implications for behavior, ethics, and even public policy.

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In recent years, studies on the foreign language effect have grown rapidly, primarily exploring its influence on risk perception, ethical judgment, ambiguity tolerance, and cognitive control. These investigations have helped expand empirical understanding of the relationship between language and thought, offering insights into the brain's cognitive processing mechanisms. However, a significant limitation remains: most research has been conducted in Western contexts, while domestic (Chinese) scholarship in this field is still nascent. There is a lack of systematic research infrastructure, limited empirical findings, and an absence of comprehensive visual analyses that could map the intellectual structure and evolution of this research domain.

To address this gap, the present study aims to conduct a visualized bibliometric analysis of foreign language effect research using CiteSpace software. By analyzing scholarly articles indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection from 2013 to 2023, this study examines publication trends, geographical research distribution, co-citation networks, and keyword clustering. The purpose is to explore the development trajectory, identify research hotspots, and reveal the knowledge structure of foreign language effect studies in the international academic arena. The findings are expected to offer valuable reference points for researchers in China to deepen their understanding of this field, refine theoretical frameworks, and broaden the application of high-tech analytical tools—ultimately contributing to the further development of foreign language effect research in domestic contexts.

## B. Methods

This study employed a bibliometric research design with a descriptive quantitative approach using visual analysis tools. The bibliometric method is suitable for systematically identifying patterns, structures, and emerging trends in a specific research field by examining a large volume of academic publications. The goal of this design is to map the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of foreign language effect research over the last decade. By visualizing relationships among authors, institutions, keywords, and references, the study aims to provide a macro-level overview of how the topic has developed globally, while identifying influential works and future research directions. The use of bibliometric visualization ensures that the analysis is objective, replicable, and interpretable within the broader scientific community.

The research was conducted using CiteSpace, a widely adopted Java-based software developed by Professor Chaomei Chen at Drexel University. CiteSpace is specifically designed for visualizing and analyzing trends and patterns in scientific literature. The software supports multiple functions, including co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and clustering of thematic areas. In this study, version 6.2.R6 of CiteSpace was used. The visual analytic workflow began with setting the time slicing, node types (e.g., references, keywords), and pruning algorithms (such as Pathfinder and pruning sliced networks) to generate structured and interpretable visual knowledge maps. These maps are useful for identifying research clusters, turning points, and intellectual milestones within the field of foreign language effect studies.

Data were collected from the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection, an internationally recognized citation database. Thematic searches were conducted using the keywords "foreign language effect" and "moral", connected using the Boolean operator OR, to maximize coverage of relevant literature. The time span was limited to publications from 2013 to 2023, and the search was carried out on December 27, 2023. After retrieving the

results, irrelevant articles were manually excluded based on title and abstract screening. The Duplicates Removal function in CiteSpace was then employed to eliminate duplicate entries, resulting in a final dataset of 91 articles. The filtered records were exported in plain text format with the selection of “full records and cited references,” and saved under the file name “download_X” for further analysis in CiteSpace.

The exported data were analyzed using CiteSpace through several types of visual bibliometric analyses. Co-citation analysis was conducted to determine the intellectual base of the field, identifying highly cited references that form the theoretical foundation of the foreign language effect. Keyword co-occurrence analysis was used to uncover core themes and evolving research hotspots. Geographical distribution was examined through institutional and author affiliations to map the global spread of research productivity. In addition, cluster analysis helped categorize literature into thematic groups, while burst detection revealed topics with sudden increases in scholarly attention. The use of these techniques enabled a comprehensive and systematic visualization of the foreign language effect's research trajectory, offering both historical context and foresight into potential future developments.

## C. Results and Discussion

### 1. The trend of publications

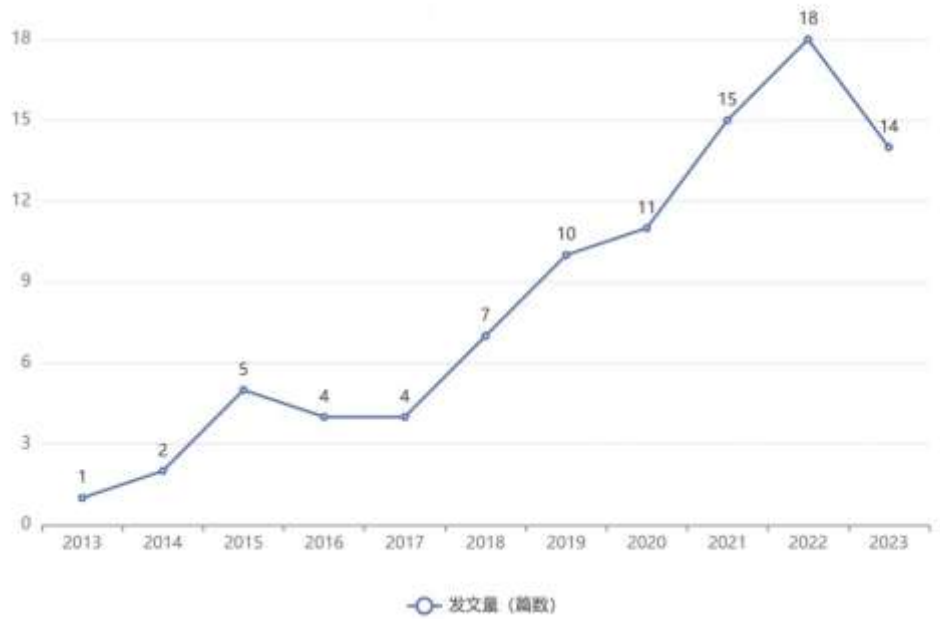


**Figure 1.** Foreign annual publication volume (2013-2023)

According to the trend line in Figure 1, it can be observed that the number of publications related to the foreign language effect abroad showed a fluctuating upward trend from 2013 to 2023. In 2013, research on the foreign language effect abroad was still in its initial stage, with only one publication. Subsequently, the number of publications in the related field began to fluctuate and grow. Although the number of publications increased from 2013 to 2018, it remained in single digits. In 2019, the number of publications exceeded 10 and continued to grow, indicating that foreign scholars began to pay attention to this topic and conduct related research. However, the total number of annual publications is still

relatively low, indicating that the topic of foreign language effect research needs to be widely promoted.

## 2. Geographical distribution

**Table 1** Ranking of the top 10 countries/regions in terms of publication volume

| Number | Country | Count | Centrality | Year (the first publication) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | USA | 22 | 0.70 | 2013 |
| **2** | China | 19 | 0.37 | 2020 |
| **3** | Spain | 15 | 0.01 | 2014 |
| **4** | England | 9 | 0.06 | 2015 |
| **5** | Poland | 9 | 0.14 | 2015 |
| **6** | Netherlands | 9 | 0.38 | 2018 |
| **7** | Italy | 8 | 0.13 | 2015 |
| **8** | Germany | 6 | 0.00 | 2018 |
| **9** | Australia | 6 | 0.18 | 2016 |
| **10** | Israel | 4 | 0.00 | 2014 |

*Source: Compiled by the author*

Based on the bibliometric analysis, the United States (USA) ranks first with a total of 22 publications on the foreign language effect since 2013, followed by China with 19 publications and Spain with 15 publications. While the USA has been a pioneer in this research area, China has shown rapid progress despite its relatively late entry in 2020, indicating an aggressive expansion of research efforts. Several European countries, including England, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Australia, and Israel, have also contributed to this field, although with lower publication volumes ranging from 4 to 9 articles. However, the distribution of publications does not always correspond to the level of influence within the global research network.

In terms of centrality, the USA stands out with the highest score of 0.70, reflecting its central role as a key reference point in global citation networks. The Netherlands (0.38) and China (0.37) also exhibit high connectivity, suggesting that despite having fewer publications than the USA, their research outputs are highly influential and well-integrated within the international academic community. Conversely, Germany and Israel recorded a centrality of 0.00, indicating limited connectivity and influence within the citation network. These findings highlight that publication volume alone does not guarantee academic influence. Strengthening international collaborations and enhancing the citation relevance of domestic research are essential strategies to increase visibility and impact in the global discourse on foreign language effect studies.


**Figure 2.** Collaboration network of countries/regions in publications

By using CiteSpace software to conduct a collaboration network analysis of the publication regions, the distribution of research achievements in the field of foreign language effect worldwide can be clearly and intuitively described, which is helpful for a deep understanding of the main research strongholds in this field. According to the data analysis results from CiteSpace, the generated network graph includes a total of 27 nodes and 48 edges, with 22 countries included in this network graph. From Figure 2 and Table 1, it can be observed that the top three countries in terms of publication volume are the United States, China, and Spain, with 22, 19, and 15 publications, respectively. This indicates that the United States has a significant advantage in the research field of foreign language effect and is the main force in research. Furthermore, the centrality of the USA is 0.70, the largest among the list, indicating that the USA has a wider influence in the foreign language effect research field. ("Centrality" is a measure of the size of the connection role of a node in the graph, and nodes with high centrality are often considered as core literature in the development process of the field.) Additionally, China ranks second in terms of publication volume in the field of foreign language effect, with a total of 19 articles in this database, closely approaching the publication volume of the United States. This indicates that domestic research on the foreign language effect closely follows the global trend and ranks at the forefront, but the centrality is still not high, indicating the need for more in-depth participation and exploration by scholars.

## 3. Co-cited Literature and Authors

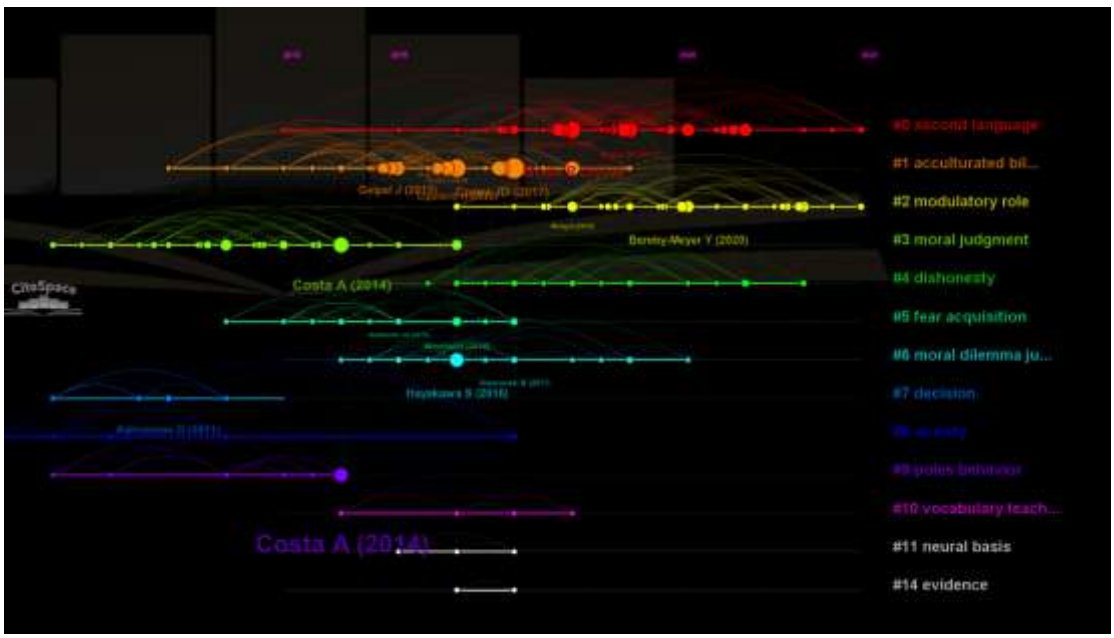


**Figure 3.** Timeline of co-cited literature clusters

The mutual citation of scientific literature reflects the interaction and connection between scientific documents, and this structure of mutual citation relationships is called a literature citation network (Rao & Pan, 2018). The timeline of co-cited literature clusters includes cluster labels and the similar literature clusters within each label. At the same time, considering the time factor, the literature clusters under each cluster can be arranged according to the time when the primary literature was first cited. Taking "#3 moral judgement" as an example, this cluster contains multiple literature pieces that were cited by other literature in different years. When this literature is first cited in the local dataset, it will be fixed under the year of the first citation, and

by default, the top 3 most frequently cited literature pieces are displayed each year. As shown in the figure, the timeline of co-cited literature clusters can help us quickly grasp the overall knowledge framework of the research field and reflect the influence and attention of the paper through the frequency of literature citations, indicating research hotspots and cutting-edge topics for readers (see Figure 3). This article lists the top ten most frequently cited literature (see Table 2) and further elaborates on the top five pieces of literature.

**Table 2** Top ten most frequently cited authors and literature

| Number | Author | Title | Published Year | Cited frequency |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Cipolletti | The Moral Foreign-Language Effect | 2016 | 28 |
| **2** | Hayakawa | Using a Foreign Language Changes Our Choices | 2017 | 26 |
| **3** | Costa | Your Morals Depend on Language | 2014 | 20 |
| **4** | Geipel | How foreign language shapes moral judgment | 2015 | 19 |
| **5** | Geipel | Foreign language affects the contribution of intentions and outcomes to moral judgment | 2016 | 19 |
| **6** | Geipel | The Foreign Language Effect on Moral Judgment: The Role of Emotions and Norms | 2015 | 18 |
| **7** | Hayakawa | Using a Foreign Language Changes Our Choices | 2016 | 18 |
| **8** | Costa | "Piensa" twice: On the foreign language effect in decision making | 2014 | 17 |
| **9** | Corey | Our Moral Choices Are Foreign to Us | 2017 | 16 |
| **10** | Costa | On Language Processing Shaping Decision Making | 2017 | 15 |

*Source: Compiled by the author*

Cipolletti provided evidence that there are multiple mental processes involved in moral judgment, and it is possible to manipulate which process is engaged when considering moral dilemmas by presenting them in a non-native language. He demonstrated that the FLE extends to moral judgment, which indicates that different types of processes can lead to the formation of differing moral judgments.

Hayakawa reviewed literature related to the impact of using a foreign language on risk, inference, and morality, and discussed potential explanations, including reduced emotion, psychological distance, and increased deliberation. His review provides an exciting opportunity for future research to investigate the relative contributions of these various mechanisms to more fully understand both how people behave when using a foreign language and, more generally, how the languages we use affect the choices that we make.

Costa collected data from several native/foreign language populations: English/Spanish (N=112) in the US, Korean/English (N=80) in Korea, English/French (N=107) in France, and Spanish or English/Hebrew (N=18) in Israel to examine whether people using a foreign language make substantially more utilitarian decisions when faced with such moral dilemmas. He argued that the increased psychological distance of using a foreign language induces utilitarianism, which shows that moral judgments can be heavily affected by an orthogonal property to moral principles.

Geipel investigated whether and how processing information in a foreign language as opposed to the native language affects moral judgments. He conducted three studies and let participants judge the moral wrongness of several private actions, such as consensual incest, that

were depicted as harmless and presented in either the native or a foreign language. He found that the use of a foreign language promoted less severe moral judgments and less confidence in participants. Harmful and harmless social norm violations, such as saying a white lie to get a reduced fare, were also judged more leniently.

Geipel examined whether the use of a foreign language influences the relative weight intentions versus outcomes carry in moral evaluations. In Study 1, participants were presented with actions that had positive outcomes but were motivated by dubious intentions, while in Study 2 with actions that had negative outcomes but were motivated by positive intentions. He found that foreign language prompted more positive moral evaluations in Study 1 and less positive evaluations in Study 2. These results show that foreign language reduces the relative weight placed on intentions versus outcomes.

In summary, the research content of the highly cited literature mentioned above mostly revolves around the foreign language effect, moral judgement, and decision-making, exploring how foreign languages influence people's moral judgement and decision-making direction. Most of the research adopts empirical research methods, setting up comparative experiments for quantitative research; there are also some review articles. The research field involves aspects of cognition, psychology, and linguistics.

## 4. Core research field

**Table 3** Keywords cluster information

| Cluster | Size | mean(Year) | Top Terms |
|---|---|---|---|
| **0** | 36 | 2016 | foreign language effect; moral judgments; thinking; cultural norms |
| **1** | 24 | 2018 | moral psychology; foreign-language effect; moral judgment; moral foreign-language effect |
| **2** | 22 | 2017 | dual process; moral judgment; process dissociation |
| **3** | 20 | 2018 | foreign language effect; moral decision; psychological distance; implicit association test |
| **4** | 20 | 2019 | foreign language; decision making; risk perception; die-rolling task |
| **5** | 19 | 2020 | moral dilemma; foreign language; moral judgment; dual processes |
| **6** | 14 | 2018 | decision making; foreign language effect; moral dilemma; foreign language |
| **7** | 13 | 2020 | foreign language effect; native language; framing effect; emotional resonance |
| **8** | 11 | 2017 | anxiety; multilingualism; proficiency |
| **9** | 8 | 2019 | signal detection theory; conflict detection; logical intuition; foreign language effect; dual-process theory |

*Source: Compiled by the author*

CiteSpace can extract keywords from literature for retrieval analysis, form clusters, and display the research hotspots and core of the field. This article uses the LLR algorithm to cluster analyze the keywords in 91 pieces of literature. Figure 4 shows the main keyword cluster knowledge map, and Table 3 lists the main cluster labels 0-9 and the keywords they cover. The modularity value (Q) and average silhouette value (S) are important indicators in CiteSpace software for analyzing network structure and cluster clarity, and are important values for measuring cluster effectiveness. Generally, the Q value is usually in the range [0, 1), and Q > 0.3 means that the community structure is significant; when the S value is 0.7, the clustering is highly efficient and convincing, and if it is above 0.5, the clustering is generally considered

reasonable (Chen, 2014). As can be seen from the top left corner of Figure 4, in this knowledge map, the Modularity Q value is 0.4935, and the average Silhouette value is 0.8098, indicating that the clustering effect is significant and the results are valuable. Based on the analysis of cluster data, combined with the main research content of the foreign language effect and the analysis of relevant literature, the core research areas of foreign language effect abroad can be summarized as foreign language effect, moral psychology, emotion, intention, dishonesty, and moral dilemma.

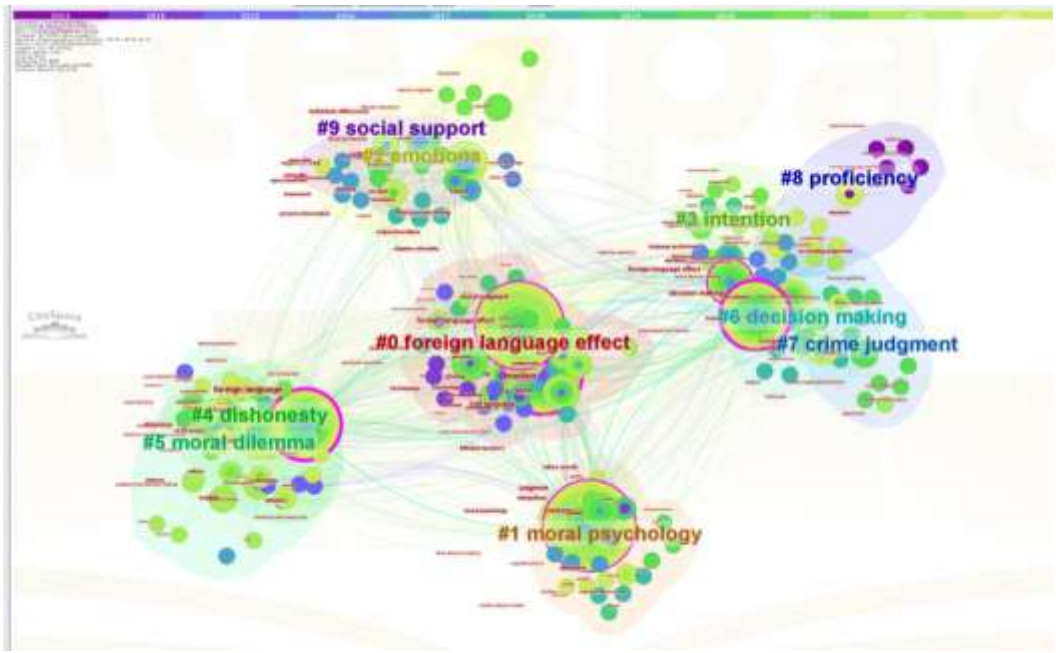


**Figure 4.** The knowledge map of keyword clustering

***(1) Foreign language effect***

Bilinguals appear to make different moral decisions in their foreign language (FL) compared to their native language (NL), despite understanding the material presented. This phenomenon is called the Foreign Language Effect (FLT)( Costa, Dunabeita, & Keysar, 2019). The FLE has also been found to reduce risk aversion (e.g., preference for a sure outcome instead of a gamble with higher or equal expected value; Hadjichristidis, Geipel, & Savadori, 2015; Keysar, Hayakawa, & An, 2012; Winskel & Bhatt, 2019; Xing, 2021), the hot-hand fallacy (e.g., believing in a winning streak; Gao, Zika, Rogers, & Thierry, 2015), causality bias (e.g., the illusion that two events are causally related when they are not; Díaz-Lago & Matute, 2018), and the endowment effect (through weaker sense of ownership; Karatas, 2020).

***(2) Moral psychology***

In moral psychology, many researches focus on moral dilemmas, which can be further separated into personal and impersonal dilemmas. Personal dilemmas require high levels of personal involvement within the act of sacrifice (e.g., pushing a man with your own hands), whereas impersonal dilemmas require less involvement (e.g., pressing a switch). Dilemmas that require a higher level of personal involvement are perceived as more emotionally aversive, and this heightened aversion to harm increases deontological responding (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, &Cohen, 2001). Geipel, Hadjichristidis, & Surian(2015a) showed that when completing personal moral dilemmas, bilinguals tend to make more utilitarian choices in their FL compared to their NL. However, there have been several studies that have not found a clear

relationship between a foreign language and moral psychology. For example, Dylman and Champoux-Larsson (2020) did not find an effect with linguistically similar languages, whereas Cavar and Tytus (2018) did not find an effect in balanced bilinguals (e.g., Croatian-German bilinguals who were equally proficient in both languages) who were highly immersed (living in the FL country, Germany).

***(3) Emotion***

Costa et al.(2019) put forward the reduced emotion hypothesis, which is about the reduced emotional impact made by FL words. Bilinguals who experience their FL as less emotional may be less susceptible to cognitive biases. This theory is also supported by the notion that there is less emotional history associated with an FL, resulting in emotional distance between the NL and FL. There are many types of bilinguals. For example, many learn both their languages from birth, in a naturalistic setting (simultaneous bilinguals), whereas others learn their FL later in life (sequential bilinguals), either in a full immersion context (e.g., living in the country of their FL) or in a formal classroom setting in the country of the NL. Grabovac & Pleh (2014) found that balanced, immersed bilinguals who have migrated to the FL country show similar emotional reactivity in their NL and FL in emotional Stroop tasks; Caldwell-Harris et al (2011) found that balanced, immersed bilinguals have similar skin conductance responses to emotional phrases across both languages, even showing greater emotional responses to endearment phrases in the FL.

***(4) Intention***

In fact, Białek, Muda, Stewart, Niszczota, and Pieńkowski (2020a) found that bilinguals performed worse in their FL when completing logical reasoning tasks. This growing body of evidence suggests that decision-making tasks affected more by emotion may be especially influenced by FL use. However, given the complexity and heterogeneity of different tasks, as well as the characteristics of different bilingual speakers, the boundary conditions of the FLE require further investigation (Costa et al., 2019).

***(5) Dishonesty***

Other research shows that bilinguals perceive dishonesty as less inappropriate in their FL (Alempaki, Do ̆gan, & Yang, 2020) and perceive crimes described in a FL as less severe (Woumans, Van der Cruyssen, & Duyck, 2020); however, Bereby-Meyer et al. (2020) found bilinguals are less likely to cheat in a FL. Further research about this aspect needs to be carried out so that we can deeply explore the foreign language effect on the dishonesty of people.

## D. Conclusion

In summary, foreign language effect research abroad has been in a stage of development and growth in the past decade. Coupled with the vigorous development of cognitive linguistics and artificial intelligence, an increasing number of scholars are entering this field, leading to increasingly rich research results. This study utilized the CiteSpace information visualization tool to conduct an overall analysis of the research areas and hot topics of the foreign language effect abroad, and found the following: 1) The research content of the foreign language effect mainly focuses on moral psychology, reduced emotion and decision making, and is closely related to cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics, making the content more vivid; 2) The theoretical explanation of the foreign language effect is richer abroad than domestically, including the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and language acquisition theory; 3) The research methods mostly emphasize empirical research, conducting quantitative analysis through experimental designs, using experimental data to support theoretical content and make the research more convincing; 4) In terms of research fields, foreign research on the foreign language effect places

more emphasis on interdisciplinary integration, such as neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, and economics, using other disciplines to explore more extensive and in-depth content.

Compared to foreign research on the foreign language effect, research in China is still in its preliminary stage. Insights for the development of this field in China mainly include the following points: 1) Strengthen theoretical research, as the relevant theories of the foreign language effect in China mostly rely on foreign references, and the development of its own theoretical system is incomplete, requiring stronger independent innovation; 2) Deepen research content by utilizing high-tech methods such as eye-tracking technology, electroencephalography (EEG), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study the influence of foreign languages on moral judgment and decision-making in the human brain; 3) Broaden the research field to promote interdisciplinary integration and explore the foreign language effect from multiple perspectives and levels. The present study is expected to provide certain references and inspiration for the development of research on the foreign language effect in China

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