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Publication date:
2021

Citation for published version (APA):

Jones, D. (2021). *Implications of trilingual education on pre-service training in Wales*. Paper presented at 9th European Conference on Language Learning, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

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Implications of Trilingual Education on Pre-service Training in Wales

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The European Conference on Language Learning 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper will focus on innovations in the Welsh education system in light of the introduction of a new curriculum in 2022. Language learning is one of the areas facing changes, with international languages, Welsh and English being placed in the Area of Learning and Experience known as Languages, Literacy and Communication. Pupils will have the opportunity to learn an international language from year 5 in primary school. This development is important in the context of the Welsh government's target of creating one million Welsh / English bilingual speakers by 2050. This target has raised concerns regarding the availability of teachers able to teach through the medium of Welsh and the role of initial teacher training to address this. Comparisons will be drawn with other UK nations teaching a foreign language in primary schools and the challenges that they have faced. The context of the Welsh language, as a minority language within Wales, raises questions regarding the linguistic / cultural competence of teachers able to teach in minority, (immersion or maintenance), settings, (cf. Canadian francophone minority context, Gilbert et al, 2004). The experiences of other trilingual models in Europe will be considered. Implications for pre-service training for introducing an international language within the existing varied bilingual setting of primary schools of Wales will be discussed.

Keywords: Curriculum, Wales, Language Learning

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Introduction

This paper will focus on innovations to language learning in the Welsh education system due to the introduction of a new curriculum in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2020) and the implications of these developments on pre-service training.

Firstly, the context of the Welsh education system relevant to these developments will be outlined, specifically within the context of the Welsh Government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 and the introduction of an international language in primary schools. Secondly, questions regarding the language competence of teachers in minority education will be raised with reference to other European and Canadian contexts. Lastly, the implications of these changes on initial teacher training in Wales will be discussed.

The Context of the Welsh Education System

The new curriculum of 2022 follows on from Donaldson's review of the curriculum, known as *Successful Futures*, published in 2015. 'Traditional' subjects will be placed within 6 Areas of Learning and Experience. This paper will concentrate on the Area of Learning and Experience (henceforth, AofLE) called Languages, Literacy and Communication.

International languages, English and Welsh are all placed within this AofLE. There are 4 'What Matters' statements for this AofLE:

1. Languages connect us.
2. Understanding languages is key to understanding the world around us.
3. Expressing ourselves through language is key to communication.
4. Literature fires imagination and inspires creativity. (Welsh Government, 2020)

These 4 statements refer to Welsh, English and international languages.

However, the 'Descriptions of learning' for Statements 2, 3 and 4 are different for:

- 1) English and Welsh, in Welsh-medium schools,
- 2) Welsh, in English-medium education and
- 3) international languages.

It is necessary to pause here in order to explain briefly the linguistic context of education in Wales. Pupils go to either:

- 1) (mainly) English-medium schools or
- 2) (mainly) Welsh-medium schools in Wales.

In Baker's typology (1996, adapted for the Welsh context in Jones, 1997):

- 1) English-medium schools are known as 'Mainstream' education – i.e. English-medium education for pupils who speak English at home.
- 2) Welsh-medium schools can be either 'Maintenance' education, for children who speak Welsh at home, or 'Immersion' education, for pupils who speak English at home.

In English-medium schools, Welsh is taught as a subject and in Welsh-medium schools, English is introduced formally as a subject at age 7. Whilst it is acknowledged that bilingual education in Wales is not simply limited to Welsh-medium or English-medium, as pointed out by Beard (2020), this distinction will suffice for the purpose of this paper. According to Baker's typology, pupils in 'Mainstream' education will receive a 'weak' form of bilingual

education, as it will lead to *limited* bilingualism whereas pupils in ‘Maintenance’ or ‘Immersion’ education will have a ‘strong’ form of bilingual education, leading to bilingualism and biliteracy.

During the 2017/2018 academic year, 66,189 children (out of a total of 277,095), i.e. around 23% of all children in Wales, were enrolled in 404 primary schools where Welsh was the main or sole medium of instruction (Key Education Statistics Wales, 2019). As noted previously, these pupils in Welsh-medium schools have the same ‘Descriptions of learning’ for both Welsh and English, i.e. they are expected to achieve the same level in both Welsh and English. For pupils in English-medium schools, on the other hand, the ‘Descriptions of learning’ for Welsh is different from that of English. An example can illustrate this difference more clearly.

Progress Step 3, Statement 3: Descriptions of learning for **Welsh and English**:

I can adapt and manipulate language and make appropriate choices about vocabulary, *idiomatic language* and *syntax* in order to express myself with fluency and clarity.

Progress Step 3, Statement 3: Descriptions of learning for **Welsh in English-medium settings**:

I can adapt and manipulate language and make appropriate choices about vocabulary, *idiomatic language* and *syntax* in order to express myself.

As can be seen, there is no expectation for the pupils in English-medium settings to communicate with ‘fluency and clarity’ in Welsh.

Therefore, following Baker’s typology, it can be argued that all pupils in Wales presently receive either a ‘strong’ form of bilingual education (in Welsh-medium schools) or a ‘weak’ form of bilingual education (in English-medium schools).

An important development in the 2022 curriculum is that all pupils will have the opportunity to learn an international language from year 5 in primary school, making Wales’ situation similar to many European contexts with a minority language. Thirteen contexts of trilingual education, where a regional / minority language exists alongside a majority language and where a foreign language (English in most cases) is also taught, are described in Mercator’s (2011) report. However, an important difference between these models and the Welsh situation is that in the trilingual European models:

“All three target languages are to be taught as a school subject as well as used as a medium of instruction during a relevant number of teaching hours” (Mercator, 2011:7).

There is no expectation for the international language to be used as a medium of instruction in Welsh schools. Following Baker’s distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ types of bilingual education, we can refer to Wales’ version of trilingual education as a ‘weak’ form of trilingual education since the international language is not used as a medium of instruction.

The new curriculum is clear that any international language can be introduced in the primary school according to the individual school’s choice:

“They may choose to offer languages which are spoken by staff at the school or by the wider community.” (Welsh Government, 2020)

This raises questions about which languages will be taught and the expertise of the teachers. In a previous paper, (in press), I have argued that the same international language should be taught at the primary as at the secondary school in order to ensure continuity of provision and the possibility of higher competence in that language.

Furthermore, the curriculum is clear that the intention of learning languages is to foster enthusiasm, curiosity, interest and enjoyment:

“Learning and experience in this Area aims to enable learners to communicate effectively using Welsh, English and international languages. It aims to encourage learners to transfer what they have learned about how languages work in one language to the learning and using of other languages. This *multilingual* and *plurilingual* approach is intended to ignite learners’ curiosity and enthusiasm and provide them with a firm foundation for a lifelong interest in the languages of Wales and the languages of the world.” (Welsh Government, 2020)

This approach, with its emphasis on ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘interest’ differs, to a certain degree, from the aims noted in the *Global Futures* document (Welsh Government, 2015) which links the importance of learning a foreign language in year 5 with increasing languages uptake at GCSE:

“Our strategy is to encourage learners to extend their knowledge of other cultures by becoming ‘Bilingual plus 1’, that is, studying English, Welsh and at least one modern foreign language from primary to examination level,” (Welsh Government, 2015:3).

This quotation demonstrates that the introduction of an international language in primary school should be seen in the context of the Welsh government’s target of creating one million Welsh / English bilingual speakers by 2050, (Welsh Government, 2017.) This means:

“Increasing the proportion of each school year group receiving Welsh-medium education from 22 per cent (based on 7,700 seven-year-old learners in 2015/16) to 30 per cent (about 10,500 in each year group) by 2031, and then 40 per cent (about 14,000 in each year group) by 2050.” (*Cymraeg 2050*, 2017:12).

Pupils in English-medium schools also play an important part in reaching the target of 1 million Welsh speakers:

“The trajectory to the million is based on the assumption that in 2031, 35% (8,500 pupils) of pupils leaving the English-medium/bilingual education sector will indicate that they speak Welsh. In 2050, the target is 50% (10,500).” (Iorwerth, 2020: 5)

This target has raised concerns regarding the availability of teachers to teach through the medium of Welsh and the role of initial teacher training to address this.

Language Competence of Teachers in Minority Education

The competence of teachers in the minority language is a concern for minority language teaching worldwide. The report *Minority Languages and Education: Best Practices and Pitfalls* (2017), which looked at 13 contexts of minority language education in Europe, noted that:

“A widely recognised problem regarding minority language education that needs to be addressed is the availability of high-quality teaching material and skilled minority language teachers.” (Mercator, 2017:7).

This has been identified as a particular problem in Wales, as noted in *Cymraeg 2050*, Action plan (2021:5):

“Reaching the 2021 targets for increasing the number of teachers able to teach Welsh, or through the medium of Welsh, has been challenging during a time of great change in education.”

According to data from the Education Workforce Council, in Iorwerth (2020), the number of teachers able to work through the medium of Welsh decreased by almost 700 between 2015 and 2020. It should be noted that there has been a corresponding reduction in the number of teachers more generally and the percentage of teachers who can speak Welsh and can work through the medium of Welsh has remained constant since 2015.

A particular problem, however, is that a large number of trainee teachers, who self-report that they are fluent in Welsh at the beginning of their course, do not choose to train to teach through the medium of Welsh, (Iorwerth, 2020). For this reason, the Welsh Government has made it clear that increasing the numbers of Welsh medium teachers is key to realising the vision of the *Cymraeg 2050* Strategy.

I would argue that it is the minority language status of Welsh, and the fact that Welsh speakers lack confidence in using the language, that can explain, in part, the shortage of Welsh medium teachers. The context of the Welsh language, as a minority language within Wales, raises questions regarding not only the linguistic competence of these teachers but their cultural competence as well. Gilbert et al, (2004), referring to the Canadian francophone minority context, expand on this. They note that the role of teachers in minority settings are more challenging as they have to teach the language and be cultural role models:

“Anyone who wishes to teach in a minority setting must have not only all the qualifications required to be a good teacher, but the parents and the Francophone community also expect them to be a model where French language and culture are concerned, to have a good command of both oral and written French and to persist in communicating in French. They are also expected to actively demonstrate their commitment to, and pride in, their language and culture within their community. Teachers must be dynamic Francophone models, whose cultural identity is firmly rooted.” (Gilbert et al, 2004:16,17)

The same is true for teachers in Welsh-medium education. In order to address these issues, various implications for pre-service training will be discussed.

Implications for Pre-service Training

- i) for the Welsh-medium sector and
- ii) for Modern Foreign Language (MFL) competence.

i) Welsh-medium Sector

The criteria for the accreditation of initial teacher training programmes in Wales (2018) state that all initial teacher training providers have to show how they are developing the Welsh language skills of their trainees. In Aberystwyth University, all trainee teachers are placed in one of three groups, according to their needs, based on a self-assessment of their level in Welsh and an audit taken at the beginning of the year. The three groups are Beginners, Intermediate and Higher. The objective for the Beginners group is to enable them to use

‘incidental Welsh’ – such as the dates, classroom instructions, feedback - in the classroom. The objective for the Intermediate group is to develop their confidence to use more Welsh and to be confident enough to apply for jobs in Welsh-medium schools. The sociolinguistic realities of living in a bilingual context is discussed with them in order to explain that they have to initiate speaking Welsh with Welsh speakers as the latter will often speak English to people that they believe are Welsh learners. The Higher group is aimed at fluent Welsh speakers to improve their accuracy in spoken and written Welsh and to discuss ways of improving the Welsh language skills of their pupils.

A Welsh Language Competency Framework has been developed, based on the *Common European Framework of Reference*, to provide details about the Welsh language skills of teachers and to show how they can progress to the next level. The levels range from A1, A2, B1, B2 and C1 in all skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. For example:

A trainee teacher will be at a level A1 in speaking if they are able to introduce themselves and others, ask and answer simple questions, e.g. where someone lives and what they like to do. A teacher at the C1 fluency level will be able to speak extensively on complex matters, present arguments using the correct register, etc. (*Welsh Language competency framework for education practitioners*, 2019).

In addition, ‘Welsh language skills’ is noted as one of the Professional Learning Standards that trainee teachers need to achieve in order to obtain Qualified Teacher Status. All students, regardless of which school they’re teaching or which subject or phase they’re teaching, have a responsibility to develop the Welsh language skills of their pupils.

The target therefore is that teaching Welsh to all learners will be transformed, so that:

- at least 70 per cent of learners will report that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school by 2050;
- that the number of primary teachers who can teach in Welsh will increase from 2,900 to 3,900 by 2031 and 5,200 by 2050;
- secondary teachers who can teach Welsh will increase from 500 to 900 by 2031 and 1,200 by 2050;
- and the number of secondary teachers who can teach through the medium of Welsh will increase from 1,800 to 3,200 by 2031 and 4,200 by 2050. (*Cymraeg 2050; A Million speakers 2017*)

ii) MFL Competence

However, similar targets do not exist for teachers to be able to introduce an international language to year 5 pupils in the primary school and there is no such requirement for teacher training providers to enable primary school teachers to teach an international language.

This might seem surprising considering that research into teaching foreign languages in the primary sector in England since 2014 and Scotland since 2012 has repeatedly pointed out that the lack of foreign language skills has been a huge challenge to teachers, (Myles, 2020, Giraud-Johnstone, 2017).

Thus far, we have discussed Welsh language teaching and international language teaching as two distinct disciplines. However, we should bear in mind that the new curriculum’s ‘Descriptions of learning’ have been developed based on a continuum of progression of languages, starting with little or no language and working towards proficiency. This

continuum of skills in Welsh in Welsh-medium schools and Welsh in English-medium schools has already been illustrated. This continuum is reflected further in the ‘Descriptions of learning’, again at Progression step 3, Statement 3, for international languages:

International Languages	Welsh (in English-medium schools)	English / Welsh (in Welsh-medium schools)
‘communicate using familiar phrases and sentences’ ‘beginning to reflect on language use in order to improve the quality of ... communication.’	I can adapt and manipulate language and make appropriate choices about vocabulary, idiomatic language and syntax in order to express myself.	I can adapt and manipulate language and make appropriate choices about vocabulary, idiomatic language and syntax in order to express myself with fluency and clarity.

Table 1: ‘Descriptions of Learning’ Based on a Continuum of Language Skills

Bearing in mind that the ‘Descriptions of learning’ in this Area of Learning and Experience are represented as a continuum, it might be suggested that teachers should be trained for this continuum of language skills. Tarsoly and Valijarvi (2020), in a special issue of *The Language Learning Journal*, (2020) point to the:

“Degree of separation between EML (Endangered and Minority Language) pedagogies and educators from MFL curricula and teachers. They follow different pathways in teacher training pathways.”

They go on to say that the “Studies presented in this special issue leave no doubt that the adoption of pedagogical approaches used in teaching MFLs can be adapted to EMLs.” I would like to suggest that pedagogical approaches used to teach a minority language can also be adapted to teaching international languages. Both teachers of minority languages and international languages can learn from each other.

This is even more important when one considers that the experience of teachers in Welsh-medium education, and immersion programmes worldwide, deal with introducing content through the second language of many of their learners. One must remember that in minority language contexts, such as the Basque Country, Wales and Ireland, native speakers of the minority language are taught alongside non-native speakers of the minority language to a greater or lesser extent. This makes the continuum of language skills very apparent within one classroom.

The fact that bilingual, or ‘emerging’ multilinguals, (Matras, 2009) are present within one classroom makes recent research into multilingual pedagogies relevant. New approaches in bilingual, trilingual and multilingual education point to the need to rethink the traditional approach of language separation in the classroom, (Cenoz, 2020). Earlier versions of these multilingual pedagogies were found in the Triple Literacy approach in Wales where teachers were encouraged to create links between Welsh, English and modern foreign languages, (Welsh Government, 2011). Multilingual pedagogies often refer to translanguaging as a planned teaching strategy (Cenoz and Gorter, 2021). However, teachers in the Basque country have raised concerns that translanguaging will be at the expense of competence in Basque and will only benefit the majority language, Spanish (Cenoz and Gorter, 2017). This has implications for the Welsh context and emphasises the importance of appropriate pre-service training so that discussions around the potential benefits of pedagogical translanguaging can be developed.

Conclusions

This paper has outlined some changes to Welsh education due to the introduction of a new curriculum in 2022 and has focussed on the Area of Learning and Experience known as Languages, Literacy and Communication. The Welsh government's target for a million Welsh / English bilingual speakers by 2050 has raised concerns to do with preparing future teachers for the Welsh-medium sector, reflecting a widely acknowledged issue for minority language education. This has led to various initiatives in initial teacher training in Wales. However, the requirement for an international language to be introduced in the primary school has not, as yet, led to changes in initial teacher training provision. Recent approaches relating to multilingual pedagogies point to a need for further research to investigate to what extent minority language pedagogies can benefit from the experiences of MFL teaching and vice versa. Wales can provide a rich context for further research in this field in order to enable teachers to teach in the varied bilingual, or trilingual, context of Wales and beyond.

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