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Exploring the effectiveness of Attention Autism on Welsh language development in children with autism

Literature review

This research will explore the effectiveness of Attention Autism on Welsh language development in children with autism. Attention Autism offers a structured approach to help children with autism build key skills, such as engagement, attention and communication through visually stimulating activities (Courtman, 2018; Inclusiveteach.com, 2023; Watson, Davies and Winterton 2017).

However, Watson, Davies and Winterton (2017) study, involved a small number of children and did not look at the long-term effects. This shows that more research is needed. This research will build on the findings of previous studies by exploring how Attention Autism can support communication, as well as bilingual learning, helping to extend our understanding of its use in Welsh language development for children with autism. There is limited research exploring how Attention Autism supports Welsh language development. This research aims to fill the gap by exploring the potential benefits of this approach for bilingual learners with autism.

Additionally, Courtman (2018) study has shown that Attention Autism can significantly improve focus and joint attention in children with autism, helping them to engage in adult led activities for longer periods. The study shows clear benefit in terms of engagement; however, it does not look how it supports two languages. This research aims to explore whether these improvements in engagement can also support Welsh language development, by helping children pay attention, stay engaged and take part in shared communication during bilingual activities.

Siencyn (2019) states that Wales follows a sequential bilingual approach, where children learn one language before being introduced to another language. This may be particularly relevant to children with autism, who can face challenges with language processing (Paul *et al.*, 2009 cited in Sturrock, 2021). This research aims to explore whether the structured, engaging approach of Attention Autism could support Welsh language learning within the process of learning two languages, by encouraging communication in a way that meets the needs of autistic learners.

Additionally, Howard, Katsos and Gibson (2021) found that some practitioners believed bilingualism could negatively affect autistic pupils' development. However, Trelles and Castro (2019) highlight that previous research shows that bilingualism may support communication skills in children with autism. This study aims to explore whether targeted interventions like Attention Autism can, in fact, support Welsh language development and challenge such assumptions. This links to the proposed research, as it will explore whether a structured approach like Attention Autism can support Welsh language learning, rather than hold it back. The study aims to challenge these views by showing how visual and engaging strategies might help children with autism take part in bilingual learning more confidently. By focusing on real practice, this research hopes to offer evidence that supports more positive attitudes towards bilingualism in autism settings.

Furthermore, Howard, Gibson and Katsos (2020) study found that although parents of autistic children often valued bilingualism, their choices were shaped by autism severity, lack of advice and pressure to prioritise English. This suggests the need for clear, supportive guidance in bilingual settings. This research will explore how structured intervention such as Attention Autism can support Welsh language development, in school and home setting. By creating engaging opportunities for communication, helping to reduce the barriers identified in previous research. There is a need for improving teaching strategies for children with autism, as many practitioners lack the necessary training (Petersson-Bloom and Holmoquist, 2022; Paisley *et al.*, 2022). The research will select participants who are already trained in Attention Autism or are taking part in it. This will allow the researcher to explore the strategy's impact without the barrier of staff lacking the right knowledge or skills. By exploring how trained staff use the approach, the research can highlight the importance of relevant training to improve outcomes for children with autism.

Davies (2023) highlight the disadvantages faced by children with additional learning needs in accessing Welsh language opportunities. This suggests a need for greater attention to this issue and supports the need for this research, which looks at how Attention Autism might make Welsh more accessible for autistic learners. Many traditional approaches do not meet the needs of these pupils (Hu, 2024), but this study looks at whether building language into structured, engaging routines can help

close that gap. It aims to show how targeted support can create more equal opportunities for children who might otherwise be left out of bilingual learning.

The Welsh Government (2021) developed a strategy to support the transmission and use of the Welsh language within families. Dallimore and Cunningham-Wynn (2017) emphasise that reaching the target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 requires a joined-up approach across school, home and community. This research which will explore the effectiveness of Attention Autism in developing Welsh language skills in children with autism, supports the idea that practitioners have an important role. By consistently using Welsh within structured interventions like Attention Autism, practitioners can help create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that contributes to Wales language goals.

Additionally, the Curriculum for Wales supports the development of Welsh across all areas of learning (Welsh Government, 2022). This supports the use of targeted interventions like Attention Autism, who need specialised support with language development and the addition of Welsh aligns with the curriculum's aims and ensures the children are included. More research is needed on how structured interventions can be integrated with the curriculum in a way that maintains consistency and engagement across different setting.

Furthermore, when a child with additional learning needs attends school, they must be supported to take part in activities (Welsh Government, 2021; Child Law Advice, 2014). This links with the proposed research. If the outcomes are positive, it will support inclusive practice and help ensure that all children are working towards the same curriculum goals, just with the right support in place.

Overall, the research aims to offer practical evidence to help ensure that children with autism have equal opportunities to develop their Welsh language skills.

Methodology

Chosen method

The chosen research methods for this study will include a mixed method: qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The use of quantitative research in this study is primarily for measuring progress in Welsh language development. According to Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013), quantitative research is based on numerical data, and for this study, it involved tracking the number of Welsh words used by the children before and after the intervention. This data will then be analysed using basic statistics to determine whether any measurable progress was made. The use of quantitative methods is beneficial as it allows for clear, evidence-based findings on the effectiveness of the Attention Autism intervention, offering measurable changes in language development.

The questionnaire method will be used to obtain this data. According to Munn and Drever (2004) cited in Lambert (2019) questionnaires are often used in education research and a familiar method for collecting data. However, Lambert (2019) argues questionnaires can be closed, open or multiple choice, and if researchers use too many different types in one questionnaire, it might confuse the participants. For this research, closed and factual questions will be chosen to ensure clarity and consistency. The following question will be asked to participants:

How many times per week do you deliver Attention Autism?

Which stage of Attention Autism do children engage with the most?

Have you observed an increase in Welsh language during Attention Autism?

On the other hand, qualitative research will be used to explore the depth of the children's language development. According to Pressle (2006) and Hammersley (2013) cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) highlight that qualitative research is a broad term that covers many types of studies and allows for different interpretations and meaning. Bryman (2008) cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) states that qualitative research looks at description instead of numbers and statistics. Sandelowski (2001) cited in Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017), emphasises that qualitative research is crucial for understanding how people interpret

their experiences, providing a more holistic view of language development. Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) agree that qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences and perspectives of participants in depth, often within smaller groups. Qualitative research would focus on observing how children with autism engage in Welsh language during Attention Autism sessions. By looking at their response such whether they repeat songs or certain words and their understanding of the language, allowing the researcher to gather detailed insight into their language development.

In this research, observation will be a key qualitative method utilised to assess how children with autism engaged with Welsh language during Attention Autism sessions. According to Nolan, Macfarlane, and Cartmel (2013), observation in naturalistic settings is a powerful tool for collecting authentic data, as it allows researchers to see real-time interactions without the influence of self-reported data. Lambert (2019) adds that a well-structured observation aids practitioners to understand pupil progress.

However, Hammon and Wellington (2021) highlight that the volume of data during observations can be overwhelming for the researcher. When collecting data during observations, there is a risk of getting lost in excessive amount of information, making it harder to focus on key points. To avoid this Hammond and Wellington (2021) suggests that observations can be strengthened through peer feedback. This will provide additional perspective, making it easier to focus on and identify key points and avoid getting overwhelmed by excessive data.

Another qualitative method that will be utilised is video evidence. Jewitt (2012) cited in Lambert (2019) states that video helps capture moments for repeated observation, making it easier to analyse. However, Lambert (2019) argues that videos can affect how individuals act, as being recorded might make them change their behaviour. Using videos can affect how children behave and stop them acting naturally. This could impact how reliable the video observations are. To reduce this, recordings can be done regularly and from a distance so children can feel less aware of the camera.

Limitations

However, there are limitations to this qualitative method. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017) highlight that researchers play an active role in qualitative research,

where even objective facts are shaped by subjective interpretation. which could lead to bias. Additionally, the potential for the Halo effect, where a researcher's initial impression of a child influences their overall perception (Gabrieli *et al.*, 2021), could shape how study is assessed. For example, a child's appearance or initial interactions might lead to positive assumptions about their abilities, even if their actual language skills do not reflect this. This could lead to an overestimation of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Gabrieli *et al.* (2021) study found the Halo effect is more stable when people judge children's faces compared to adults. This suggests adult may form strong first impressions of children based on looks, which could affect how they treat or support them in early years. This is important to consider in the proposed research, which looks at how Attention Autism supports Welsh language development in ALN children. The Halo effect could impact how language skills are perceived and supported, potentially affecting the research findings. It is important to be aware of how these perceptions could shape interactions and assessments, ensuring the research remains accurate and fair.

Additionally, According Oswald, Sherratt, and Smith (2014) the Hawthorne effect is where participants change their behaviour due to the awareness of being observed, could also invalidate results. Oswald, Sherratt, and Smith (2014) suggest that building trust with the participants and allowing them to become familiar with the observer can mitigate this effect, ensuring that the behaviours observed are more reflective of their typical responses. This approach will be employed in the study by allowing the children to become familiar to the researcher before starting the data collection, helping to reduce the risk of this bias.

Chosen sample

Novosel (2023) defines non-probability sampling as a method in which participants are not selected at random, meaning not everyone in the population has an equal chance of being chosen. However, Novosel (2023) highlights that non-probability sampling increases the likelihood of bias. Despite this, the approach is suitable for specific research aims and context (Newby, 2014). In this research, which explores the effectiveness of Attention Autism on Welsh language development in children with autism, non-probability sampling allows for a targeted selection of participants

who are directly relevant to the study. By focusing on a specific group, this method provides a deeper understanding of the research focus.

Novosel (2023) states that there are four types of non- probability sampling: convenience, snowball, quota and purposive. In this research project, a purposive sample will be selected, focusing on children who are currently participating in Attention Autism sessions and have exposure to incidental Welsh language. According to Nolan, Macfarlane, and Cartmel (2013), purposive sampling is a method used to pick a group based on what is already known about the wider population. Newby (2014) and Hammond and Wellington (2021) add that purposive sampling methods are used to achieve specific goals. This is particularly important in this research as the sample need to include children with autism who engage in Attention Autism, ensuring the results were relevant to the study's aims. The sample group for this study will consist of 200 children and their teachers. This number was chosen to ensure the sample was large enough to provide meaningful data while still manageable for close, qualitative analysis. According to Newby (2014) for populations of 100 or fewer sampling is unnecessary, and its benefit become questionable when the population is under 200. The decision to include children already exposed to incidental Welsh language is purposeful, as it allows for a more focused examination of how Attention Autism could support Welsh language development.

However, a challenge with purposive sampling as highlighted by Miles and Huberman (1994) cited in Palinkas *et al.* (2015) is the difficulty of selecting a variation of participants. This may require adjustment to sample as the research progresses. Initially the sample selection will be children with some exposure to incidental Welsh language and familiarity with Attention Autism. However, as the study progresses, samples may be adjusted to ensure it includes a full range of experiences and Welsh language exposure.

Mixed method

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in a mixed-methods approach is chosen to balance the strengths and weaknesses of both. Hammond and Wellington (2021) states that mixed methods involve combining multiple methods, often qualitative and quantitative. Roberts-Holmes (2018) agrees that mixed

method is a valuable way to carry out research in early childhood as it brings together both number-based data and real-life observations. In exploring the effectiveness of Attention Autism on Welsh language development for children with Autism, this approach would enable the collection of measurable data on language progress, alongside detailed observations and insights from researcher, offering a comprehensive view of how the intervention supports Welsh language development.

However, Hammond and Wellington (2021) argue that mixed method approach can be overwhelming, particularly for new researchers. Mixed methods involve complexity in analysing data from different sources. Despite this, using both observation and questionnaire will support a clearer understanding of how Attention Autism influences Welsh language development. Additionally, Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) suggests that mixed methods help reduce bias by using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, avoiding the limits of using just one.

Triangulation

The study will use triangulation, according to Hammond and Wellington (2021) triangulation is when researchers collect information in different ways. Roberts-Holmes (2018) agree and add that it helps to build complete view of research. This involves collecting data through multiple methods to provide a more comprehensive view of the research topic. In this study, triangulation will involve combining observations, questionnaires, and video analysis, providing a broader perspective on how Attention Autism supports Welsh language development in children with autism. For instance, by comparing data from observational notes with feedback from staff and video recordings of the sessions, the researcher could confirm whether the observations aligned with staff reports and video evidence. This helps to strengthen the validity of the findings by ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered (Noble and Heale, 2019; Quincy, 2014).

However, Hammond and Wellington (2021) highlight that triangulation while useful, can be time consuming and require careful analysis. To mitigate this, a clear plan and colour coding data collection can be used to efficiently analyse data (Campbell *et al.*, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Informed consent

Informed consent in research means that participants agree to take part in a study after understanding what the study involves (Arellano, Alcubilla and Leguizamo 2023; Kadam, 2017; Manti and Licari, 2018). Participants are expected to provide voluntary informed consent at the start of a study and an informed consent form which requires a participant signature and date (BERA, 2024; Manti and Licari, 2018). This ensures they understand what is expected of them and that their participation is entirely their choice. Researchers must communicate the details of the study in a way that participants can easily understand (BERA, 2024)

However, some participants may not fully understand the nature of the study and what it involves. Consent must be given in a way that respects the participant's ability to understand the study (Ennis and Wykes, 2016; Hudson *et al.*, 2023; BERA, 2024). For participants who might not fully understand the research, such as participants with additional needs or language barriers, the above research suggest consent should be tailored to their needs. This is why it's important for researchers to find ways to explain the study in an accessible manner.

Consent is considered essential because it ensures that participants are not forced into participating (Akhurst and Leach, 2023; Klykken, 2021). BERA (2024) states, participants should be made aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason. This right to withdraw respects the participant's autonomy and ensures that no one is coerced into staying in the study against their will. Researchers need to make this clear to all participants, including those with additional needs or children who may not fully understand the research process.

However, it might not be always possible to get consent from children. For children and those who cannot consent on their own, the responsibility falls to the adults in charge to give consent (BERA, 2024; Richardson, 2019 cited in Hendry *et al.*; 2024). In practice the researcher will need to ensure they seek consent from those responsible for them, such as parents or guardians. Richardson (2019) cited in Hendry *et al.* (2024) highlight that parental consent alone does not mean the child agrees to participate in a way they understand. For this reason, assent may need to be considered. BERA (2024) states children under the legal age of consent, the term

assent is used, meaning the child agrees to participate. In practice, this means paying close attention to how a child communicate, even non-verbally (Richardson, 2019 cited in Hendry *et al.*, 2024). For example, if a child shows signs of distress that suggest they do not want to participate, this must be respected as much as verbal refusal.

The right to withdraw

The right to withdraw is a part of the ethical framework of any study. As BERA (2024) states, participants should always be told they can leave the study at any point without needing to explain why. This ensures that participants feel comfortable with their decision to join and can leave if they feel the need. In studies like Attention Autism on Welsh language development in children with autism, withdrawal can occur if the child becomes distressed or uncomfortable, and this right should be respected. Researchers must make sure that participants and their families feel safe and confident in their decision to remain or leave the study.

If participant withdraw, any efforts to get them to rejoin should be done carefully, without added pressure or incentives (BERA, 2024). This is particularly important in children with autism, as they may be more vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed or distressed (Ashworth *et al.*, 2025). For example, a child with autism might need more time and space before deciding to take part again, but using pressure or reward may cause confusion and go against the ethical guidelines.

Information sheets

Ennis and Wykes (2016) explain that participant information sheets are documents given to participants, providing them with everything they need to know so they can make an informed choice about whether to take part. However, participants information sheets need to be accessible (Ennis and Wykes, 2016; Hudson *et al.*, 2023; BERA, 2024). Ennis and Wykes (2016) found that these sheets can often be quite complicated and may need to be simplified to support informed consent.

Hudson *et al.* (2023) add that these sheets should be simplified, focusing on the most important information, such as the study's purpose. BERA (2024) agrees and adds that information sheets and consent forms should be tailored to the specific needs of participants, including factors such as their age and neurodiversity. This

approach ensures that the information is accessible and appropriately adjusted to support informed consent across a diverse range of participants. By doing so, researcher can ensure the information is clear and participants can better understand what they are agreeing to.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Participants confidentiality and anonymity can be protected by using methods like anonymising names or changing details to protect identity (BERA, 2024). According to BERA (2024) researchers must handle participants data correctly to ensure their research is ethical. This includes secure data storage and clear boundaries about who can access the information. Researchers need to think clearly about confidentiality and anonymity to prevent any harm to participants, especially when dealing with sensitive topics or vulnerable groups.

However, BERA (2024) highlights that anonymity may not be possible in small communities, where people may guess who is involved, even if names are hidden. This makes it essential for researchers to be transparent from the start. Before collecting data, researchers should clearly explain these possibilities to participants (BERA, 2024). Additionally, a 2017 article was found to include anonymised interview data that could not be verified, raising concerns about poor research practice (Dougherty, 2021). This shows that while confidentiality is essential, over-anonymisation may risk weakening the credibility and trustworthiness of findings.

Risks

BERA (2024) states that researchers can face physical or psychological harm particularly when working in risky environments. The research exploring the effectiveness of attention autism on Welsh language development in children with autism, this is especially relevant. Working closely with children who may display unpredictable or challenging behaviours can carry both physical and emotional strain. This highlights the need for careful planning, such as clear risk assessments and supervision, to safeguard the researcher (BERA, 2024; UWTSD, 2022).

UWTSD (2022) states that there is a risk of participants information needing to be shared without permission, thus breaching confidentiality. While confidentiality is a key principle, the researcher must recognise the duty of care. For example, if during

observations if the researcher becomes aware of any concerns suggesting a child may be at risk of harm, they are legally obligated to follow safeguarding procedures for the best interest of the child, even if this involves breaching confidentiality (UK Government, 2004; The Welsh Government, 2012). To ensure transparency, participants will be made aware that there are certain circumstances where confidentiality may need to be breached to protect a child's safety. This will be outlined in the participants information sheet and the researcher's duty to follow safeguarding procedures.

UWSTD (2022b) state that participants may experience anxiety or psychological harm because of research methods such as observations or questionnaires, which can at times be perceived as intrusive. In the context of this research, this needs to be considered. Children with autism often face challenges with sensory differences, which are linked to behaviours like intolerance of uncertainty (Cardon and Bradley, 2023; Cardon, Buckhannon and Rojas, 2023). This intolerance can make changes in routine or being observed by strangers particularly stressful, sometimes causing distress or difficulty in regulating emotions. To mitigate potential harm, the researcher must ensure observations are conducted in a familiar and supportive environment.

The university may be held accountable for any data protection issue that arise. According to Legislation.gov.uk (2018) The Data Protection Act 2018 sets out the general responsibilities for handling personal data, including six key principles such as processing data lawfully, keeping it accurate and storing it securely. To mitigate risk and ensure compliance the university the university has a duty to put the right systems in place to follow data protection rules, ensure personal data is used safely and protect people right as set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (UWTSD, 2022a). To meet the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018, the researcher will ensure that data is collected in a lawful manner, only gathering information necessary for the study. All data will be securely stored in the cloud to reduce the risk of data breach (Li, Xiao and Zhang, 2023). The researcher will follow all university policy and Uk legislation to safeguard personal data.

Additionally, there may be potential security risks to the university from individuals who have conflicting interests (UWTSD, 2024). For example, if a researcher is employed by an organisation that would also benefit from the results, they might

share information or make decisions that favour that organisation instead of the university. To mitigate this, identifying any conflicts of interest before research starts, can allow universities to take reasonable measures (UWTSD, 2024). Additionally, new technologies like cloud storage can help reduce data breaches by improving how data is managed (Li, Xiao and Zhang 2023). If conflict is identified, new technology would allow universities to limit access to sensitive data and ensure it is monitored.

In conclusion when carrying out research, exploring the effectiveness of Attention Autism on Welsh language development in children with autism it is important that ethical guidelines are followed throughout. This ensures that consent is informed and accessible, particularly for children and families with additional needs. Safeguarding and Data Protection for all involved in research must be considered at every point to ensure the research in line with ethical standards.

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