

Multilingual Practice in the Early Years

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I have not used AI within this assignment.

Recording

Multilingual video.MOV

Bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the ability to use two or more languages fluently (Bialystok, 2017). In early childhood education, fostering bilingualism has been linked to cognitive, social, and educational advantages (Garcia & Wei, 2014). With an increasing number of children learning Welsh as an additional language (WAL) or English as an additional language (EAL), integrating structured language development activities into the curriculum is crucial (Welsh Government, 2014). Such integration not only facilitates language acquisition but also enhances overall cognitive development (NCELA, 2020). This paper examines the benefits of bilingualism, the roles of WAL and EAL, brain development, divergent thinking, and their connections to early years' frameworks and programmes. Additionally, it emphasises the significance of Welsh songs about the days of the week, the weather, colours, and feelings, in reinforcing language learning.

Bilingualism and multilingualism offer a wide range of benefits, particularly in terms of cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and enhanced metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok et al., 2012). Children who speak more than one language are better equipped to understand the structure of it and to transfer knowledge across languages (Cummins, 2008). Additionally, bilingual children often exhibit greater executive function skills, such as the ability to focus attention, switch between tasks, and solve problems, compared to their monolingual peers (Bialystok, 2017). One of the more compelling benefits of bilingualism is its positive effect on literacy development. Bilingual children tend to have an easier time learning to read and write because they can transfer knowledge and learning strategies across different forms of communication. (August & Shanahan, 2006). This ability to apply language skills across different contexts supports academic success in both languages. As shown the video attached, the use of morning welcome songs in both Welsh and English can help children develop phonemic awareness, a crucial skill for early literacy. Repetition and rhythm found in songs about the weather, colours, and emotions are effective tools for helping children build their vocabulary in both languages (Jones & Richards, 2020). Moreover, the integration of bilingual songs in early years settings can promote cultural awareness by introducing children to different linguistic and cultural expressions through everyday learning activities. The benefits of bilingualism extend beyond the early years. Bak *et al.*, (2014) suggest that bilingualism can delay cognitive decline in older adults, showing that the brain's

ability to process multiple languages provides long-term benefits. This evidence further underscores the importance of fostering bilingualism in the formative years of childhood education.

The increasing number of children in Wales who are learning Welsh as an Additional Language (WAL) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) underscores the need for structured support in language acquisition. The Welsh Government's 'Cymraeg 2050' strategy aims to increase the number of Welsh speakers by promoting Welsh from an early age, emphasizing the importance of early exposure to the language (Welsh Government, 2017). Children learning either Welsh or English as an additional language benefit from immersion-based learning approaches, where they are exposed to language in context through songs, rhymes, and interactive activities (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Morning welcome songs in Welsh, such as "Bore Da" (Good Morning) and "Mae hi'n bwrw glaw" (It is raining), provide valuable language exposure, enabling children to associate language with real-life situations and concepts. These songs are particularly effective because they incorporate simple vocabulary related to the weather, days of the week, and emotions, all of which are relevant to young children's everyday experiences. By repeating these songs regularly, children strengthen their grasp on vocabulary and develop a deeper understanding of language structures (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015). Furthermore, songs that reflect the cultural significance of the language also help children establish connections with their heritage, which is particularly important in the context of Welsh language acquisition (Jones, 2016). In addition to the exposure to language, teachers can facilitate the learning process for WAL and EAL learners by integrating visual aids, gestures, and props. This multisensory approach not only helps reinforce the meanings of words but also ensures inclusivity, making language learning more accessible to all children (Pinter, 2011). For example, showing images of weather conditions alongside songs like "Mae hi'n bwrw glaw" helps children associate the word with a concrete concept, thus enhancing comprehension.

Research has shown that bilingualism has a profound impact on brain development. It enhances neural plasticity, which is the brain's ability to adapt and form new neural connections in response to learning and experience (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). Studies using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) have revealed that bilingual individuals often have increased grey matter density, particularly in regions of the

brain associated with executive functions, such as attention regulation and cognitive control (Mechelli et al., 2004). This increased brain activity supports the enhanced cognitive abilities that bilingual individuals demonstrate, such as better memory retention, task-switching abilities, and superior problem-solving skills (Costa et al., 2008). Songs and rhythmic activities, which are commonly used in early childhood education, further support neurological development. Rhythmic elements in songs, such as repetition and melody, activate various brain regions involved in auditory processing and motor coordination (Goswami, 2015). In bilingual education, these songs not only support language learning but also engage the brain in ways that strengthen auditory discrimination and phonemic awareness. For example, songs like "Pa liw yw'r enfys?" (What colour is the rainbow?) activate multisensory learning, where children process auditory and visual stimuli simultaneously. This reinforces their ability to differentiate sounds and words across both languages (Patel 2010).

Kharkhurin (2012) indicates that divergent thinking is the ability to generate multiple solutions to a problem, is an essential skill in fostering creativity and innovation. It is shown that bilingual individuals exhibit superior divergent thinking compared to monolinguals. This is because bilinguals are able to switch between different linguistic and cognitive frameworks, allowing them to think flexibly and approach problems from multiple perspectives. The ability to think creatively is particularly important in early childhood education, as it encourages children to explore innovative ideas, express themselves in numerous ways, and find unique solutions to challenges (Ricciardelli, 1992). Morning welcome songs provide an excellent opportunity to promote divergent thinking in young children. For example, when children are encouraged to participate in songs that involve movement, or when they are given the opportunity to create new verses in Welsh and English, they engage in a form of linguistic play that promotes cognitive flexibility. This type of play encourages them to think creatively and produce novel ideas that reflect their understanding of language and concepts (Van de Weijer et al., 2021). In line with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory, such interactive activities allow children to engage in social learning through collaboration, language exploration, and imaginative thinking.

The integration of bilingual education aligns with key early years' frameworks such as the Foundation Phase Framework in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015) and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England (DfE, 2021). These frameworks emphasise the importance of language development, social interaction, and holistic learning through play, creativity, and music. The Foundation Phase Framework supports the development of Welsh language skills by incorporating experiential learning and promoting active communication through everyday activities. Welsh-language songs, such as those about the weather, days of the week, and feelings, provide a fun and engaging way for children to enhance their language and cognitive skills (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Similarly, the EYFS framework highlights the importance of music and movement in fostering communication and expressive arts. Bilingual songs serve as an effective tool for supporting these frameworks by promoting language acquisition in a natural, context-based environment (DfE, 2021).

Bilingualism brings considerable cognitive, social, and educational benefits, aiding brain development and encouraging divergent thinking. Welsh as an Additional Language (WAL) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) offer unique opportunities for language acquisition through structured immersion and interactive learning methods, including the use of songs. These songs help children develop phonemic awareness, build vocabulary, and strengthen neural connections, while also promoting creativity and problem-solving skills (Patel, 2010). Early years' frameworks, such as the Foundation Phase and EYFS, support bilingual education by integrating play, music, and experiential learning into the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015). Moving forward, early childhood educators should continue to incorporate multilingual activities, ensuring inclusive and effective language development for all children, helping them grow linguistically, cognitively, and socially (Bialystok, 2017).

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