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Multilingual practice in early years

In the world today it is common for people to use one or more languages in their daily lives. This is where the term bilingualism and multilingualism come from.

Bilingualism is seen as the ability to use two languages across different skills such as speaking, reading, listening and writing. In contrast multilingualism is the ability to use more than two languages in a range of context. For example, an individual may speak English at home, Spanish within an educational setting, and Italian in a social situation, depending on their environment and interactions.

In this assignment I will be discussing how bilingualism and multilingualism are used in everyday life, particularly within social and educational contexts. In this assignment I will also be exploring the advantages of speaking more than one language for an individual and the benefits that bilingualism and multilingualism have on communication and cultural understanding. I will also be looking at the challenges individuals can experience. Additionally, this assignment will consider the wider significance of language diversity in contemporary society and its impact on opportunities, identity and social interactions. Understanding language is essential for us to understand the world around us, as it enables individuals to interpret, communicate and engage with others 'Languages and *literacy* are fundamental to human communication. They enable us to make sense of what is heard, read and seen, and thus to develop our understanding, empathy and our ability to respond and to *mediate* effectively.' Welsh Government (2022)

There are several benefits associated with bilingualism and multilingualism. One of the main benefits is improved communication when an individual is able to use more than one language it allows them to interact and communicate with a range of people both in a personal and professional context. Another important advantage is a greater understanding of cultural awareness. Language is closely linked to culture and when a person can understand and use multiple languages it can help that individual to develop a greater understanding of different traditions, perspectives and ways of life. Baker (n.d) argues that 'Being bilingual creates a bridge between generations, with grandparents, for example, or with other family members. This

helps to build a sense of belonging to the extended family.' When a person is bilingual, they can feel a stronger sense of belonging to their family and community. Within education the terms such as EAL (English additional language) refers to individuals who are learning English as in addition to their first language. While WAL (Welsh Additional language) This is like EAL but specific to Wales. It refers to learners who are learning Welsh as an additional language, rather than as their first language. Both EAL and WAL learners often use a different language within the home environment and are required to learn an additional language for education purposes.

From a cognitive perspective when an individual is exposed to multiple languages it can have a positive impact on brain development. Learners who use more than one language are often required to switch between languages which can strengthen memory, attention and problem-solving skills, this process is sometimes referred to as cognitive flexibility. O'Brien López (2025) explains that bilingualism can help strengthen executive functions is the fact that both languages are active in the brain of the bilingual speaker even when only one of the languages is being used. The executive function system is fortified when bilingual individuals must select one language and inhibit the other one, or when they have to switch between them. This can be seen in practice within educational settings. For example, during a setting visit in Finland one practitioner would communicate with the children only in Finnish while the other would use only English. This provides the children with consistent exposure to both languages supporting their ability to process and understand multiple linguistic inputs. As a result of regular language exposure such as this learner may develop enhanced mental agility over time. However, in the early years stages of language some learners may experience difficulties in processing and understanding information. This is why it is key for learners to access the correct support in educational settings to ensure cognitive benefits can fully develop.

In Welsh education settings, in line with the Cymraeg 2050 Welsh language strategy which states . 'Creating the right conditions for new learners of all ages to develop and use their skills is a key objective' (Welsh Government 2018) schools are increasingly implementing Welsh language workshops for families. The aim is to build parents confidence in using Welsh at home supporting children to transfer and apply their language skills between home and school.

The Welsh Government Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers also aims to

increase the number of Welsh speakers by 2050. This framework highlights the importance of providing learners with those opportunities to develop their bilingual skills, as stated in the document “We want all our learners to have the opportunity to be bilingual. In order to reach a million speakers” (Welsh Government, 2018). Bilingualism and multilingualism can also have a positive impact on divergent thinking. This is because individuals who use more than one language regularly practice switching between linguistic systems and selecting appropriate vocabulary in different contexts. As a result, they may develop greater cognitive flexibility which can support creative thinking and the ability to generate a wider range of ideas when problem solving. In Wales the main education framework is the Curriculum for Wales (2022). This framework replaced the previous national curriculum and now has a strong focus and emphasis on communication, literacy and multilingual skills. It recognised the importance of Welsh as a national language and encouraged learners to develop both the Welsh and English language alongside awareness of other languages. The curriculum encourages learners to become confident in using more than one language and to also understand the value of different languages and cultures.

Within an early year's settings learners develop their language skills through progression steps which are used as a guide to develop communication skills over time. These help children build basic speaking and listening skills.

In Welsh medium education settings where Welsh is used as the main language of teaching these programs help learners become more fluent in Welsh and use the language confidently in everyday situations. The Welsh Government (2025) states ‘Learners need to hear, see and read Welsh regularly and repeatedly. They also need to be supported to apply their learning and use their Welsh in new contexts.’ When children are exposed to Welsh regularly it enables them to become confident in speaking and understanding both the Welsh and English and embedding those skills at a young age and a sense of cynefin.

Welsh Assembly Government (2008) states “Welsh Language Development within the Foundation Phase can: help to encourage feelings of belonging and a sense of heritage, roots and community, support an understanding of the Welsh culture”

When setting implement this within the early years it will ensure learners feel confident and passionate to develop their language skills throughout their education.

The Welsh government has set a target to increase the numbers of Welsh speakers by 2050. This is intended to be achieved through a range of strategies, including making the learning of Welsh more engaging so that learners develop a positive attitude towards the language. The government also aims to “Transform how we teach Welsh to all learners in order that at least 70 per cent of those learners report by 2050 that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school.” (Welsh government, 2018)

Reflecting on activity I used a bilingual routine song in both Welsh and English, including greeting the children ‘good morning’ and then asking the children how they are feeling and then discussing the weather. This activity supported early language development by exposing children to key vocabulary in both languages within a familiar daily routine.

My activity linked to the progression steps in curriculum for Wales with a focus on progression step one embedding those early basic Welsh language skills. Where learners begin to develop early communication skills through listening and responding. By repeating the key phrases in both Welsh and English children are supported in recognising and understanding basic vocabulary which helps build confidence in using both languages. In order to progress in the development of their skills in Welsh, children will need to have experienced enjoyable, first-hand sensory experiences by taking part in quality speaking, listening and viewing activities, Welsh Assembly (2008). The activity supported the learners to develop oracy skills as they were encouraged to listen, respond and join in when they feel confident.

Repetition of simple phrases help reinforce understanding and allows children to make connections between the two languages. The Welsh assembly Government (2008) states that children should be able to differentiate between sounds and discriminate sounds from each other. Activities should be differentiated to ensure children make progress, showing us that when children are exposed to listening to Welsh in a variety of activities from a young age like through stories, nursery rhymes and songs, they are able to listen and respond appropriately at their individual level. I felt that this activity promotes the foundations of language learning in line with the curriculum for Wales which will then support children to feel confident in using the Welsh language.

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