

ECEY 4010 - Multilingual Practice in the Early Years

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AI Statement

I have not used AI in any way for this assignment.

Video Link

Video Link - https://uowtsd-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/g/personal/2416167_student_uwtsd_ac_uk/Ef2ONv6SVBBFuvXzTrTgqpwBaFrHh0GMlj73nTEuC1v24g?nav=eyJyZWZlcnJhbEluZm8iOmsicmVmZXJyYWxBcHAIoiJPbmVEcmI2ZUZvckJ1c2luZXNzliwicmVmZXJyYWxBcHBQbGF0Zm9ybSI6IldlYiIsInJlZmVycmFsTW9kZSI6InZpZXciLCJyZWZlcnJhbFZpZXciOiJNeUZpbGVzTGlua0NvcHkifX0&e=kEdFXk

Bilingualism in the Early Years

The most commonly accepted definition of bilingualism, in Wales, is the ability to use two languages for one's daily communication, including both the written and spoken word (Thomas et al. 2022, p.7). It is to this definition that this piece refers when it speaks of bilingualism. However, it is important to note that there is some debate as to when a person is considered to be bilingual, with no official consensus on the level of fluency or competency required (Baker, 2014, p. XVIII-XIX). This paper will explore some of the benefits of bilingualism and bilingual practice in the early years, particularly as it relates to brain development, divergent thinking, and well-being. Consideration will also be given to some of the limitations and drawbacks of bilingualism in the early years and how they may be combated. Finally, it will detail some of the history of bilingualism in Wales and the initiatives and policies which support it today.

Bilingualism has a significant impact on brain development, particularly in areas associated with language processing and production. The auditory cortex, where information is initially processed, is better developed in bilingual brains (Kuipers and Thierry, 2015, p.27-32). This results in improved listening skills, as a result of needing to distinguish between the phonetic styles of multiple languages. The Broca's area, where information is comprehended, shows a higher density of grey matter and improved connectivity (Wong, Yin and O'Brien, 2016), this reflects the increased demands placed on a bilingual brain to switch between languages and maintain grammatical coherence. The Wernicke's area, where responses are formulated, and motor cortex, where the physical movements associated with speech originate, are also more efficient in bilingual brains (Yan and Yinying, 2022). This allows for easier linguistic processing, production, and conversational fluency. As a result, it is easier for bilingual individuals to acquire and communicate in additional languages, paving the way for multilingualism.

As a result of these structural changes, bilingualism has also been linked to a host of cognitive benefits. One such benefit is improved cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is the ability to adapt to new circumstances, situations, and concepts (Dajani and Uddin, 2015, p.571). It has been linked to easier acquisition and understanding of knowledge as well as the ability to more easily change behaviour to reflect the added information (Lee et al., 2024). Therefore, bilingual individuals are more adept when working in unfamiliar areas, as they are cognitively primed to take on new information and to apply it to their practise.

Another cognitive benefit which has long been linked to bilingualism is improved divergent thinking. Divergent thinking is a key aspect of creativity and has long been associated with mental flexibility. It is characterised by the ability to conceptualise novel ideas by considering a broad range of information, allowing for more possible solutions when problem solving and improved creativity (Thakral et al., 2021, p.729).

Xia, An and Guo (2022) found that high proficiency bilinguals performed better on average than low proficiency bilinguals when completing divergent thinking tasks. These findings suggest that bilingualism enables greater divergent thinking, particularly at greater levels of competency. Furthermore, a study conducted in 2020 by Agostini, Apperly and Krott found that children undertaking bilingual education showed significant improvements in skills associated with divergent thinking after a year. This suggests that bilingual learning may be linked to better divergent thinking skills.

However, a 2021 study conducted by Booton et al. found that there was no correlation between bilingualism and divergent thinking. Their results show that, when evaluated on their divergent thinking, bilinguals performed no better than monolinguals. This calls into question the validity of the long-held belief that learning or using additional languages improves divergent thinking. A study by Zheng, Denervaud and Durrleman (2023) supports these findings, with their study

showing that bilingualism had no effect on a child's ability to think divergently but on their ability to think convergently. The term convergent thinking is used here to refer to an individual's ability to rationalise and come to a single, logical 'best' solution from a range of predetermined solutions (American Psychological Association, 2018)

Considering the conflicting nature of these findings, while it is unquestionable that bilingualism does provide cognitive benefits, it is difficult to say with certainty to what extent it impacts divergent thinking, if at all.

Moving now to the social implications of bilingualism, this paper will examine the concept of English as an Additional Language [EAL] and Welsh as an Additional Language [WAL]. Both terms can broadly be defined as not speaking the dominant language of an area or setting or speaking it as a secondary or tertiary language. In the case of those unable to speak or comprehend the language, it can lead to feelings of fear, low self-confidence, and isolation (Scott, 2021). For example, a child attending an English medium setting, coming from an entirely German speaking background will struggle to communicate their needs, complete activities and will have difficulty forming social bonds.

Because of this, it is important that these learners are met with compassion and knowledgeable educators. While children are predisposed to acquiring new languages (Baker and Wright, 2021, p.130-133), they require support and education in order to achieve fluency. This requires that educators be well versed in effective, evidence-based techniques to support language acquisition and bilingualism (Welsh Government, 2023). One well known technique, particularly in relation to young children, is the use of simple, repetitive songs or rhymes, such as those demonstrated in the attached video. These songs help to embed key phrases, while encouraging children to experiment with novel words and sentence structures (Pourkalhor and Tavakoli, 2017). Research has shown that children whose linguistic education incorporated these songs or rhymes scored significantly better in language-based tasks than where they were excluded (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2022, p.252). Another particularly effective technique, specifically in bilingual education, is 'sandwiching,' or saying a word first in the native tongue then in the additional language and finally once again the native language (Valdez, 2020, p.129). This enables learners to directly connect the words in the alternative language and their dominant one. The efficacy of this can be enhanced through the use of props, such as those seen in the video, these provide a non-verbal, tangible cue for the unfamiliar word. The use of physical objects for this also activates more areas of the brain, as it must process not only verbal input but physical sensations as well (Rao, Newlin-Haus and Ehrhardt, 2016, p.226-235).

When children are properly supported to acquire the dominant language of the area or setting, it provides extraordinary social and well-being benefits. Whilst low self-confidence is common among early WAL and EAL students, once they are able to communicate effectively in the dominant language, research has shown that bilingualism enhances self-confidence and esteem (Li and Shen, 2022, p.600-613). This is because the individual is able to properly express themselves in more situations and becomes able then to advocate for themselves in those situations. Additionally, the individuals, during the process of learning the language, become aware of their capacity to learn and their ability to be successful in their goals. This significantly improves their self-esteem, causing them to be more proactive in their development and more ambitious in the expectations of themselves.

As this paper draws to a close, let us consider bilingualism, specifically in the context of Wales. Wales has a long and often tragic history regarding its language. From the Laws in Wales Acts instituted by King Henry VIII, which disqualified Welsh speakers from holding office by declaring English to be the official language of the courts and public administration, amongst other things (Jones, 2024), to the 'Welsh Not', a widespread practice in schools in the nineteenth century, where a child would be given some sort of token that indicated they'd spoken Welsh and would

then face physical punishment for its possession at the end of the day (Johnes, 2024, p.1), there have been many attempts to eradicate the Welsh language. However, in 1993, as a result of tireless dedication by activists and politicians, Welsh citizens gained the right to communicate primarily in Welsh, without facing repercussions in terms of employment and ambition (Welsh Language Act 1993).

Since then, there has been a concerted effort to increase the number of Welsh speakers in Wales. At present, there are twenty-two Welsh language initiatives in place in Wales (Mentrau Iaith, no date given), instituted to aid in the Welsh Government's aim to reach one million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017). This ambitious initiative consists of three principal areas of work, increasing the number of Welsh speakers, increasing the use of Welsh, both socially and professionally, and creating an encouraging environment for the use of Welsh (Welsh Government, 2024). A key strategy of this is a lifelong approach, beginning in early years education. The Welsh government recognises that while social learning, learning through friends and everyday situations, does raise the number of Welsh speakers in Wales, it does not do so in sufficient numbers to achieve their goal of a million Welsh speakers (Welsh Government, 2017). As a result, and relying upon recent research, the Welsh government has begun to push programmes intended to impact young children during their most critical development periods. This is done with the aim of easing the process of learning and using an additional language, as outlined in the sections above. This strategy has been supported by the implementation of the latest curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024b) and the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2022), both of which place particular emphasis on the incorporation of the Welsh language into all areas of education.

Taken together, it is clear that bilingualism is culturally, socially, and emotionally beneficial, though much research is still required to parse out the details of how and why bilingualism affects people's lives and experiences.

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