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Multilingual Practice in the Early Years

This essay explores bilingualism and multilingualism. It covers five topics: Benefits, Welsh as an additional language, brain development, divergent thinking and frameworks.

Definition and Benefits

According to Jayanath (2021) bilingualism is the ability to speak and understand two languages and multilingualism involves speaking and understanding more than two languages. However, Grosjean (2014) cited in Baker and Wright (2021) provides a definition of bilingualism and multilingualism that prioritises the regular use of languages than the fluency. Valdes (2015) cited in Baker and Wright (2021) agrees with this, whilst adding it is also the ability to understand, read or write. This suggests that the definition has several meanings and not precise.

There are many benefits to bilingualism and multilingualism as listed by Chumbo (2018) one of which is the ability to be open to different cultures, which can reduce racism and increase understanding and communication with people from other cultures. For instance, a child who can speak Bengali and English, may feel more comfortable embracing diversity. They may find it easier to form friendships with children from various backgrounds. By understanding and valuing different cultures, they contribute to an inclusive environment. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner microsystem which involves direct interaction with family, friends and community and how this can have an impact on a child's development (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny 2017).

Additionally, Chumbo (2018) states that bilinguals find it easier to learn new languages. Ayres (2019) agrees, adding that bilinguals/ multilinguals can be as much as 10% more productive, due to better focus and the ability to switch between tasks. This is likely to aid in learning new languages. For instance, a child who speaks Bengali and English might find it easier to learn Hindi since the Bengali language share similar words. Their ability to switch between task helps them pick up new languages more quickly. However, According to World Humanitarian Movement

(2021) language confusion may occur in young child who speak more than one language. This can lead to children mixing language, which can disrupt effective communication.

Welsh as an additional language

According to Welsh Government (2014) the definition of Welsh as an additional language is a child whose first language is not Welsh or English and are learning in a Welsh Medium setting and requiring extra support to access the curriculum. This definition highlights that children who are not from Welsh speaking backgrounds need additional support to help learn Welsh, which is often the main language used for teaching.

Dallimore and Cunninton-Wynn (2017) state that early year's education plays a key role in supporting Welsh language acquisition for children from non-Welsh speaking homes. This early exposure to Welsh helps children develop language skills and makes it easier for them to use Welsh language in everyday situations. Siencyn (2019) states that Wales has focused on sequential bilingualism, where children who are familiar with one language start learning a second language. In practice, sequential bilingualism can be seen in setting where children speak one language at home, like English, and then start learning Welsh at around two or three years old. For example, children may hear Welsh during lessons or through incidental Welsh exposure such as greeting or songs. This aligns with Bandura's Social learning theory, where language is acquired by observing and imitating others (Loveless, 2024).

However, Siencyn (2019) adds that economic and political challenges make it unlikely that the Mudiad Meithrin will be able to expand Welsh Medium early years setting as planned. This further limits the opportunities for Welsh medium education in early years. Additionally, Children's Commissioner for Wales (2023) states that many local authorities report they are unable to provide services for children with additional needs through the medium of Welsh. This shows a gap in support, making it harder for children with ALN to learn Welsh. One way to support is by using strategies like Attention Autism to introduce Welsh language. According to Inclusiveteach.com (2023) state Gina Davis, a speech and language pathologist, developed the Attention Autism approach to support children with autism in building

their communication, social and cognitive skills. In Attention Autism progress is seen through stages: Stage 1 focuses on engagement, stage 2 on sustaining that engagement, and stage 3 on turn taking. The video activity link shows how this approach can support language development and incidental Welsh, by capturing children's interest. Using this within current settings can give children with ALN more chance to engage in Welsh, even where formal Welsh medium support is limited.

Brain development

Bilingual brains can develop differently from monolingual brain, as managing two languages involves unique processes. According to Nacamulli (2015) bilingual brain can look and work differently compared to monolingual brain. Nacamulli (2015) adds that switching between languages requires effort, which can strengthen the prefrontal cortex that is responsible for problem solving and multitasking. Vygotsky suggested that logical reasoning and reflective thinking come from language (Kurt, 2022). As a result, bilinguals may have stronger executive functions, making them better at handling multiple tasks or demand at once.

Hofmann (2020) explains the roles of specific areas in the brain that handle language. The Wernicke's area located in the left side of the brain is responsible for understanding and processing languages. For bilinguals, this part of the brain is constantly processing more than one language, so it might be more active, thus improving language comprehension. Hofmann (2020) adds that Broca's area located on the left side of the brain is responsible for speech production. For bilinguals, adjusts to handle speech in more than one language, showing how flexible the brain is when it comes to managing different languages.

Treuter and Soros (2021) state that the motor cortex is responsible for producing and perceiving speech. This is the physical act of speaking and understanding language. For bilinguals, this area must manage speech in both languages, making it work harder. This shows how bilingualism can enhance the brain's ability to process and produce language more effectively.

A study by Pliatsikas *et al.* (2020) found that bilingual showed more grey matter and increased white matter in the brain, from early childhood to young adults, compared to monolinguals. Grey matter is responsible for language related activities, such as processing and understanding language. White matter connects different brain

regions, ensuring smooth communication between them. Both are considered key to brain development, with more grey and white matter suggesting better functioning and efficiency.

However, while research suggest that bilingualism has cognitive benefits, a study by Folke *et al.* (2016) found that bilinguals had lower metacognitive, the ability to assess ones thought, compared to monolinguals. This suggests that bilingualism may have mixed effects depending on the skill being assessed.

Divergent thinking

According to Guilford (1967) cited in Madore, Addis and Schacter (2015) divergent thinking is the ability to create new ideas, by putting together different types of information in new and unique ways. For example, a child who is given an orange and asked what else it could be used for. The child might say it could be a ball to roll or a stamp to make prints, demonstrating divergent thinking by finding multiple uses for the same object.

Storme *et al.* (2017) study found that bilinguals who are used to switching languages regularly were more creative when forced to switch language during the task. In contrast, bilinguals who are not used to switching languages were more creative when they did not switch languages during task. This suggests that the impact of language switching on creativity depends on frequency of language switching in everyday life.

Additionally, Van Dijk *et al.* (2018) argues that bilinguals might be better at being creative since they can understand different cultures, and have better focus and memory, however they also state that creativity depends on both the individual and their surroundings. This Aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, where cognitive development is shaped by social interaction and cultural experiences (Kurt, 2022). This suggests that while being bilingual could help with creativity, other factors like the environment and personal experiences also play a role. For instance, the ability to understand different cultures and perspectives might aid in divergent thinking

However, a study by Booton *et al.* (2017) found no difference in performance on any of the divergent thinking task between monolinguals and bilingual children. This

suggests that bilingualism might not always have an impact on divergent thinking in every situation. Overall, bilingualism seems to have a connection to divergent thinking, however how much of an effect it has might depend on the person and the context.

Frameworks

The Welsh Government (2017) aims to have one million people speaking and utilising the Welsh language by 2050. This aim focuses on promoting bilingualism, not just to preserve the Welsh language but also to grow and thrive in everyday life. The Welsh Government (2021) A policy to achieve this strategy is the National Policy on Welsh language transmission and use in families. This policy encourages parents to speak Welsh at home and pass the language on to their children (The Welsh Government, 2021).

However, Welsh Government (2021) highlighted that parents who speak Welsh are more likely to pass it onto their children, especially if they are fluent and live in areas like Northwest Wales. This could cause a regional divide, where Welsh language transmission is more likely to occur in areas with existing Welsh speaking population, while other parts of Wales may be left behind in efforts to promote bilingualism.

According to Dallimore and Cunningham-Wynn (2017) to increase Welsh speakers by 2050 requires structured home, school and community approach to support bilingualism. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, where school, home and community work together (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny 2017). This collaborative approach is likely to ensure the growth of the language, especially in areas that are less likely to engage in Welsh.

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