

Multilingual Practice in the Early Years

ECEY4010

Contents

- Benefits of bilingualism/multilingualism
- Welsh as an additional language
- Brain Development
- Divergent thinking
- Frameworks and programs

AI Statement

ChatGPT was used in this assignment.

- How should I structure an introduction and conclusion?
- Can you read through and check my grammar and spelling. Have I missed an opportunity for a new paragraph?
- Can you rearrange my reference list and put it in alphabetical order?

Hyperlink

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Introduction

Bilingualism and multilingualism offer a wide range of cognitive, linguistic and cultural benefits for young children, and these ideas are central to early years practice in Wales. Firstly, this paper will explore the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, drawing on research that highlights improvements in problem-solving, attention control and mental flexibility (Education North Tyneside, n.d.; De Houwer, 2015). It will then examine how Welsh and English function as additional languages within early years settings, considering national expectations that Welsh should be embedded naturally through routines, play and interactions (Welsh Government, 2022; HWB, n.d). Following this, the paper will discuss how multilingualism supports brain development and contributes to children's executive functioning (Walsh, 2015). It will also review research on divergent thinking and creativity in bilingual learners. Finally, the paper will reflect on early years practice, including a taught Welsh activity, to show how incidental Welsh and repetition support children's emerging bilingualism.

Benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism

Children who grow up using two languages gain a wide range of benefits that support their learning and development. The Education North Tyneside (n.d) explains that bilingual learners often show stronger cognitive skills, such as better problem-solving, improved attention control, and the ability to switch between tasks more effectively. These skills can contribute to stronger academic performance (Education North Tyneside, n.d.). Bilingualism also supports language and communication development. Children who use more than one language tend to develop a clearer understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and language structures, and they often become confident at moving between languages depending on the situation. This can also support literacy and reading comprehension. The Education North Tyneside (n.d) also highlights social and cultural benefits, as bilingual children are exposed to different cultures and traditions, helping them appreciate diversity and build positive relationships (Education North Tyneside, n.d). De Houwer (2015) says research shows that multilingual practices can strengthen children's ability to think flexibly and creatively. Studies suggest that

when children grow up in an environment where more than one language is used and supported, they often become more observant and mentally adaptable than children who speak only one language (De Houwer, 2015). Using the idea of “double first language acquisition” is children who regularly hear parents using a different language can develop equal fluency and confidence in both languages. This early exposure allows them to treat each language as a first language rather than a second one, and it can also make it easier for them to learn other languages later in life (De Houwer, 2015).

Welsh/English as an additional language

Wales is a bilingual nation, and early years settings play an essential role in supporting children who are learning Welsh or English as an additional language. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasises that Welsh should be a natural part of children’s daily experiences, describing it as something that should be woven through routines, play, and interactions rather than taught as a separate subject (Welsh Government, 2022). The Hwb (n.d) guidance explains that all children in Wales have a relationship with the Welsh language and culture, regardless of their background, and that learning about Welsh identity, history, and the development of the language helps children build a sense of belonging and cultural understanding (HWB, n.d). PACEY (n,d) explains that children should experience Welsh naturally throughout the day, with the language woven into everyday routines and activities. They emphasise offering meaningful opportunities to hear and use Welsh, using songs, rhymes, stories and outdoor play to make learning enjoyable. The guidance highlights the importance of repetition, clear modelling, and linking new words to children’s interests, as this helps learners at any stage, including babies or those new to the language. Practitioners are encouraged to use facial expressions, resources and familiar contexts to support understanding, giving children plenty of chances to listen, copy and repeat new vocabulary confidently (PACEY, n.d). In my own practice, I taught a Welsh language activity that focused on introducing a new question and answer through repeated asking, answering and actions. In line with PACEY’s (n.d) guidance, I used clear modelling, visual cues and repetition to help children internalise new language patterns. Incidental Welsh was

woven throughout the session and the wider routine, such as greeting children with “Bore da” and reinforcing vocabulary previously taught.

Brain Development

Multilingualism supports children’s brain development because using more than one language encourages them to think and make sense of their ideas in different languages (Natural Literacy Trust, n.d). Sharifova (2026). Babies are naturally able to learn multiple languages, as their brains are built to recognise and absorb a wide range of speech sounds from birth (Natural Literacy Trust, n.d). Sharifova (2026) explains that bilingualism supports brain development by strengthening memory, attention, and problem-solving. Children who speak more than one language often show better focus and can switch between tasks more easily because they regularly move between two language systems. This constant switching helps the brain become more flexible and efficient. The article also highlights that bilingualism activates areas like the prefrontal cortex, which supports self-regulation and decision-making (Sharifova D, 2026). As bilingual children switch between two languages, they use more thinking skills than they need for learning just one language (Walsh, 2015). Walsh (2015) says that this helps them build stronger executive function skills, such as paying attention, reasoning, and solving problems in flexible ways. Recent research shows that bilingual children often do better than monolingual children on tasks that use these skills. Their strength in these tasks likely comes from dealing with the challenge of managing two languages. In bilingual settings, children learn to notice important speech sounds in both languages, even when the meanings are similar (Walsh, 2015).

Divergent thinking

Su, Wei and Chuang (2026) say that divergent thinking is a core aspect of creativity and involves the ability to produce diverse and original ideas. Su, Wei and Chuang's (2026) research has explored how a growth creative mindset may support this form of thinking as it encourages deeper thinking, resilience and flexibility during creative tasks.

However, linking a growth creative mindset to divergent thinking remains unclear (Su, Wei and Chuang, 2026). Booton *et al* (2021) explains that two main explanations have been put forward for why bilingualism might enhance divergent thinking (Booton *et al*, 2021). The executive function hypothesis suggests that switching between languages strengthens cognitive control, which could support flexible idea generation thinking (Booton *et al*, 2021). The cultural diversity hypothesis argues that bilinguals may be more creative because they have more diverse life experiences such as moving between countries and participating in multiple cultures thinking (Booton *et al*, 2021). However, Booton *et al* (2021) found no evidence that bilingual children outperform monolinguals on divergent thinking tasks. Using a large sample and controlling factors such as intelligence and vocabulary, the study showed that bilingualism did not predict fluency, flexibility or originality (Booton *et al*, 2021). This contrasts with Su, Wei and Chuang's (2026), which showed that a growth creative mindset significantly enhances divergent thinking with multicultural attitudes and openness to experience. Their results suggest clear mechanisms, whereas Booton *et al* (2021) found no bilingual advantage.

Frameworks and programs

A range of national frameworks and programmes in Wales place bilingualism at the heart of early years practice. According to the Welsh Government (2017), Cymraeg 2050 is trying reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and has a long-term goal for early years provision (Welsh Government, 2017). The goal is to reach a position where children under five have good exposure to the Welsh language enabling them to start their journey towards fluency (Welsh Government, 2017). The Welsh Government's (2021), Welsh Promise supports Cymraeg 2050 and encourages practitioners and settings to create language-rich environments where Welsh is visible, valued and used

in everyday interactions (Welsh Government, 2021). The Curriculum for Wales Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning have been designed to help learners communicate confidently in Welsh, English and a range of international languages (HWB, n.d). It also aims to support learners in applying what they know about how language works in one language to their learning and use of others (HWB, n.d). This multilingual and plurilingual approach is intended to spark curiosity and enthusiasm, giving learners a strong foundation for lifelong interest in the languages of Wales and the wider world. This aims to develop ambitious, capable learners who are prepared to continue learning throughout their lives (HWB, n.d). Together, these frameworks guide early years settings to embed Welsh and other languages meaningfully in daily routines, helping children develop confidence, curiosity and a positive sense of identity through rich linguistic experiences.

Conclusion

Bilingualism and multilingualism offer children valuable cognitive, linguistic and social advantages that support their overall development. Research shows that using more than one language strengthens executive functioning, enhances attention and flexibility, and deepens children's understanding of how language works (Education North Tyneside, n.d.; Walsh, 2015). In Wales, these benefits are supported through national frameworks that encourage Welsh to be embedded naturally across daily routines, play and interactions, helping children build confidence and a sense of identity (Welsh Government, 2022). My own practice demonstrated how incidental Welsh and repeated exposure help children build a bank of new Welsh vocabulary and begin developing bilingual skills, reflecting guidance from PACEY (n.d) and De Houwer (2015). Overall, the paper highlights the important role early years practitioners play in creating language-rich environments that nurture confident, curious and culturally aware bilingual learners.

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