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Benefits of bilingualism/multilingualism

Bilingualism is the ability to speak, read and write two different languages.

Multilingualism is the ability to speak, read and write more than two languages. Welsh Government (2022) defines them both as, bilingualism, the understanding and usage of two different languages and multilingualism, the understanding and usage of multiple languages. Learners may differ in how fluent they are in each language and may use them selectively across different settings and with different individuals. Bilingualism and multilingualism are shaped by real life use and linked to different situations and social relationships. Baker and Wright (2025) states there are many dimensions of bilingualism and multilingualism such as language ability and language use. Some individuals speak and write in two or more languages and others can understand and read two or more languages. Considering this, there is no clear definition and both bilingualism and multilingualism are open to interpretation and opinion. The ability to speak more than one language offers a wide range of cognitive, social and economic benefits. One of the most significant benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism is communication skills.

Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust (2024) proposes that individuals who can speak multiple languages can connect with a broader range of people, cultures, and experiences throughout their lives, which strengthens social relationships. It supports the development of cultural identity, and a sense of belonging also known as Cynefin in Wales. Bilingual learners can process and reflect on ideas across two language systems, which can enhance understanding and learning. Additionally, bilingualism is associated with increased cognitive flexibility and creativity. These skills may also provide economic advantages, as bilingual individuals may have access to a wider range of employment opportunities.

English as an additional language (EAL) and Welsh as an additional language (WAL)

EAL refers to learners who speak a language other than English at home and are learning English in addition to their first language. Similarly, WAL applies to learners who are Learning Welsh as an additional language. In Wales WAL learners are supported through policies and framework. The curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings (2024) acknowledges the importance of the Welsh language in Wales and highlights that Welsh should be taught in all settings in Wales to enable children to become ambitious, capable learners who 'can communicate effectively in different forms and settings, using both Welsh and English'. In 2008 the Welsh Government produced the guidance, Welsh Language Development. It gave guidance to early years providers to enable learners to develop their Welsh language by delivering the Welsh Language Development Area of Learning.

Learners should be introduced to the Welsh language incidentally through greetings, songs and rhymes. Further development of the Welsh language through mark making and reading will be made when learners become confident and able. Recently new

Legislation has come into effect. The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 plans to improve Welsh Language education by setting learning goals for the Welsh language to support lifelong Welsh language learning. Optimistically, with the introduction of this new act the goal of reaching one million Welsh speakers as outlined in Cymraeg 2050 will be achieved, as in 2025 the Welsh Government reported there was a decline in Welsh speakers in Wales. It is estimated that there are now 828,500 people, 26.9% of the Welsh population able speak Welsh as well as English compared to 2020 where it was 28.8% of Welsh residents, equalling 872,200 were bilingual in English and Welsh.

Brain Development

There are many studies on the effects of bilingualism on brain development in children, however the results are conflicting. Research by Bialystok (2008) who compiled the results of 971 children from the Peabody picture vocabulary test found that Monolinguals had a higher average score of 105, compared to bilinguals who had a score of 95. Bilingual children also scored less than monolingual children in fluency tests where they had one minute to name as many animals as possible starting with certain letters. However, findings in a study by Soniakurniawati and Riska (2024) show that bilingualism is strongly associated with improved cognitive control in children, especially in areas such as executive functioning, mental flexibility, and awareness of language structure. Sharifova (2026) agrees as she believes that when individuals learn and repeatedly use two languages the brain is constantly managing those languages by selecting and coordinating the relevant vocabulary across the languages in a fast-paced context. This demonstrates advanced cognitive functioning and ability. She also states that bilingual children have improved multitasking abilities, as research indicates bilinguals cope better in uncertain situations that require quick adaptation, suggesting bilingualism extends beyond language ability and supports overall intellectual growth. Along the same lines, Christos *et al* (2020) found that compared to monolinguals, bilinguals demonstrated notable differences in brain development. These include increased grey matter volume, and greater white matter suggesting reduced developmental decline during late childhood and adolescence. Despite the amount of research, Bialystock and Werker (2017) highlight challenges in bilingual research on brain development. One of those being the wide variation in bilingual experiences that children have with bilingualism. Without exact criteria and standardised measures there is always the risk that unseen variables may influence the findings.

Divergent thinking

Van Dijk et al (2001) defines divergent thinking as the ability to produce multiple ideas and solutions to a problem or challenge. Ken Robinson (2016) agrees, he states that divergent thinking is having multiple answers to a question and many ways to

understand a question. He also believes that we all have the capability to be highly divergent in our thinking, however as we grow and become educated it declines. Kharkhurin and Wei (2014) propose that divergent thinking is an unconscious process that happens when attention is relaxed and defocused, allowing ideas and unexpected solutions to emerge. Bilingual individuals can sometimes involuntarily switch between two different languages, this is known as code switching. According to Hernandez (2013) the caudate nucleus plays a crucial role in managing language control and the caudate nucleus plays a substantial part in cognitive processes such as learning and memory. Findings in a study by Kharkhurin and Wei (2014) demonstrated that bilingual individuals who frequently and consistently engage in code-switching display higher levels of creativity than those who do not use code-switching in their daily lives. This is likely because regular use of multiple languages strengthens important cognitive processes, which improve problem-solving abilities.

Links to policy

In Wales, there are several key frameworks and policies that link directly to bilingualism, EAL/WAL and brain development and bilingualism is embedded within national policy and frameworks. The Curriculum for Wales (2025) is the main framework for education in Wales, and it promotes language development, inclusion, and creativity. The Framework highlights the importance of Wales as a bilingual nation. It ensures that all learners have suitable opportunities to learn both Welsh and English, helping them gain the confidence to use each language in everyday situations. Being bilingual is more than just a practical skill. Knowing both languages opens the door to Wales's distinctive literature, history, and culture. Developing knowledge and understanding in these areas helps learners become active, informed, and successful citizens in Wales. It is grounded by twelve pedagogical principles designed to support a positive attitude towards learning, strengthen their metacognitive skills and develop critical, critical thinking skills.

Cymraeg 2050: A million users (2017) demonstrates a national commitment to increasing bilingualism and preserving cultural identity. Cymraeg 2050 aims to make Welsh an integral part of everyday life, ensuring that the language is used at home, in the workplace, and in schools. To give children the strongest possible start in Welsh, the plan promotes the expansion of Welsh-language nurseries, so that by the time they reach compulsory school age, they are well-prepared to attend Welsh-medium schools. In addition, Cymraeg 2050 seeks to increase the availability of services in Welsh, supporting the creation of a truly bilingual Wales where the language is a living part of daily life.

These policies align with the goals of the 2003 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convention. It aims to protect, respect and raise awareness of intangible cultural heritage as well as assisting countries to meet this goal.

To help learners develop Welsh as an additional language practitioners should be enabling adults that help support children's learning. The curriculum for Wales (2025) believes that Practitioners should design engaging learning experiences that are suitable for learner's developmental stages. They should encourage learners to think about their learning, provide appropriate challenges, and create opportunities for learners to achieve and experience success. I chose to conduct a number hunt activity because it is engaging and developmentally appropriate, as it uses play based learning to support early math. It supported bilingual language development and physical skills in a fun and appropriate way. The children were interested and engaged as they were not just sitting and listening to me talk, they were moving around the classroom, searching and exploring, linking how children grow and develop through play. Isaacs (1929, cited in Welsh Government, 2025 p. 2) The children were learning Welsh as I was repeating the questions and in English and Welsh but because it was built into a game the children were practicing their Welsh language without even realising because it was repetitive in a fun way. Adding challenges like 'find a big number' or 'be quick' created curiosity and a sense of fun, which kept the children motivated. Finally, it supported their social development as the children worked together to find the numbers, taking turns, building their confidence and sense of achievement when they found the numbers.

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