

Multilingual Practice in the Early Years

ECEY4010

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1. Recording Hyperlink:

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2. Essay:

Multilingual Practice in the Early Years.

Introduction

Multilingualism refers to the ability to communicate in more than one language, while bilingualism specifically denotes fluency in two languages (Filippi, D'Souza, & Bright, 2019). In early childhood, exposure to multiple languages plays a crucial role in developing linguistic skills, cognitive flexibility, and social competence. Research

shows that early engagement with more than one language positively influences brain development, executive function, and metalinguistic awareness (Supporting Multilingual Development, 2021).

In Wales, there is a national commitment to increasing the use of the Welsh language from early childhood, supported by government policies such as Cymraeg 2050 and the Welsh Language Education Act. This assignment explores the benefits of multilingualism and the significance of Welsh as an additional language. It also examines neurological development, the concept of divergent thinking, and how these relate to early years frameworks. These themes are discussed in the context of a recorded Welsh-language activity that includes singing 'Bore Da' and discussing the weather, identity, and feelings, all within a bilingual pedagogical approach known as Slot Drilio.

Benefits of Multilingualism

Research consistently demonstrates that multilingualism enhances children's executive functioning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Bialystok & Martin, 2004; Bialystok, Craik, & Viswanathan, 2005). These improvements include inhibitory control and attention-switching skills, foundational abilities that support academic success and adaptive learning (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012). These cognitive benefits align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises that language acts as a primary tool for intellectual development and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Verywell Mind, 2009). Multilingual children engage in diverse social contexts that require them to adapt both linguistically and cognitively, thus reinforcing the development of executive control (Vygotsky, 1978; Bialystok & Martin, 2004). Complementing these behavioural findings, neuroscientific studies reveal how early exposure to multiple languages physically shapes brain structures involved in these executive processes.

Exposure to multiple languages enhances metalinguistic awareness, which is the ability to think about and manipulate language structures. This skill contributes to reading development and language comprehension in various contexts (Barac and Bialystok,

2018). Furthermore, children who learn several languages show greater empathy and cultural sensitivity as they navigate different linguistic and social norms (Fan et al., 2018). These interpersonal skills are essential in diverse educational environments and support the principles of inclusive early years education outlined in the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022).

However, the application of multilingualism in early years settings is not without challenges. Practitioners must be well-supported in their own language confidence, and there may be barriers where families have limited exposure to the second language at home. These nuances highlight the need for robust training frameworks and parental engagement strategies (Conteh, 2018; García and Wei, 2014).

Brain Development and Neuroplasticity

Neuroscientific studies provide biological evidence that early exposure to multiple languages influences brain structure and function. For example, bilingual children exhibit increased grey matter density in the inferior parietal cortex and enhanced white matter integrity in areas linked to executive function (Mechelli et al., 2004; Li, Legault, and Litcofsky, 2014). These findings are consistent with Piaget's concept of cognitive schemas, which are constructed and reorganised through new experiences. In this context, exposure to multiple languages creates rich and adaptable neural pathways.

Moreover, bilingual infants demonstrate a sensitivity to phonetic contrasts in multiple languages that extends beyond the typical timeframe observed in monolingual infants (Garcia-Sierra et al., 2011). This ability enhances their language discrimination skills and facilitates the switching between different language systems, ultimately contributing to better long-term academic and cognitive outcomes (Hayakawa and Marian, 2019). From a Bronfenbrennerian perspective, these cognitive developments are influenced by interactions within the microsystem—specifically the home environment—with language-rich settings, such as those created in Slot Drilio, playing a crucial role.

Welsh as an Additional Language

The Welsh Government has outlined a clear vision for bilingualism through its Cymraeg 2050 strategy, which aims to achieve one million Welsh speakers by the year 2050 (Welsh Government, 2023). This strategy emphasises the importance of Welsh-medium education in Early Years as a crucial pathway for enhancing language transmission. Additionally, the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 mandates that all children should have access to Welsh-medium educational provision. It also establishes categories for the use of the Welsh language in schools, including early years settings.

Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) require local authorities to enhance access to Welsh-medium early years provision by investing in Cylchoedd Meithrin and Flying Start programs (Welsh Government, 2024). Training initiatives such as Camau and Cam wrth Gam support the professional development of early years practitioners, enabling them to confidently deliver Welsh during daily routines (Welsh Government, 2024; National Centre for Learning Welsh/Cwlwm, 2023).

The Welsh Promise, created by Cwlwm in collaboration with Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, offers a structured framework to help early years settings provide an 'Active Offer' of Welsh language experiences (Cwlwm; PACEY Cymru, n.d.; Early Years Wales, n.d.). By advancing through bronze, silver, and gold levels of engagement, these settings can incorporate routines such as greetings, songs, and discussions, even before achieving full fluency. This approach enhances linguistic immersion right from the beginning (Cwlwm; Early Years Wales, n.d.). Such methods are essential for ensuring equitable language access, especially for families that do not use Welsh at home.

Divergent Thinking

Divergent thinking is the ability to generate multiple solutions to open-ended problems and is a key component of creativity. While earlier studies proposed that bilingualism might enhance divergent thinking through increased cognitive flexibility, more recent research paints a more nuanced picture. A British study by Booton et al. (2021) found no significant difference in divergent thinking scores between monolingual and bilingual children when controlling for vocabulary, non-verbal IQ, and socioeconomic status.

Similarly, Lange et al. (2020) did not find consistent evidence supporting a relationship between bilingualism and creativity in their large-scale, well-controlled study. Furthermore, Sampedro and Peña (2019) concluded that executive functions, rather than bilingualism itself, primarily mediate the relationship between language experience and creative performance (Booton et al., 2021; Lange et al., 2020; Sampedro and Peña, 2019). Nevertheless, executive functions, which are often enhanced by multilingualism, such as task-switching and cognitive inhibition, play a crucial role in the cognitive processes that underlie creative thinking (Barac and Bialystok, 2012; Bialystok, 2015). These findings indicate that while bilingualism may not directly improve divergent thinking as assessed by standardised tests, it still provides valuable cognitive tools that support creative exploration in real-world learning contexts. For instance, activities like Slot Drilio can indirectly foster divergent thinking by encouraging children to respond in various ways, explore new forms of expression, and connect language with emotional literacy (Barac and Bialystok, 2012; Bialystok, 2015; Bialystok et al., 2005).

Links with Early Years Frameworks and Programmes

Multilingualism and Welsh language practices are integral to the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales, which prioritise communication, well-being, and cognitive development. The Curriculum for Wales requires a cross-curricular approach that includes the promotion of the Welsh language and culture across all Areas of Learning and Experience (Welsh Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2022). These objectives support the use of Welsh in daily routines, songs, and activities within Foundation Phase settings, where Welsh language development is officially recognised as a key area of learning (Welsh Government, Foundation Phase Framework, 2015).

The recorded activity includes greetings such as ‘Bore Da’, weather-related questions like ‘Sut mae tywydd heddiw?’, identity inquiries such as ‘Pwy wyt ti?’, and discussions about feelings. This demonstrates the practical application of these frameworks, integrating Welsh language development with emotional literacy and social interaction, which are essential components of early years pedagogy.

This activity was part of Slot Drilio, a structured and repetitive language session designed for early years settings to reinforce key Welsh vocabulary and phrases. Slot Drilio sessions follow a familiar format and aim to enhance children's confidence and fluency in Welsh through consistent and playful repetition. By incorporating songs, questions, and vocabulary related to feelings, Slot Drilio supports the active offer by seamlessly embedding Welsh into children's daily routines in an engaging and accessible manner. Therefore, it serves as an effective tool aligned with best practices endorsed by Early Years Wales and Social Care Wales.

Guidance from Social Care Wales and Early Years Wales recommends the daily use of Welsh in both structured and informal settings to promote bilingualism (Social Care Wales, 2023; Early Years Wales, n.d.). Programs like Flying Start offer structured opportunities for Welsh-medium engagement from birth to age four, facilitating smooth transitions into formal education. Additionally, Estyn (2023) encourages regular reflective practices to assess children's engagement and to adapt language use to meet individual developmental needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, multilingual practice in early years education provides a wide range of cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional benefits. These advantages encompass improved executive functioning, heightened metalinguistic awareness, and greater neural plasticity. While recent evidence indicates bilingualism may not directly enhance divergent thinking as measured by standard tests, it continues to support cognitive processes vital for creative learning.

The Welsh context has a strong policy and pedagogical framework for promoting bilingualism. Strategies such as Cymraeg 2050, the Welsh Language and Education Act 2025, and various practitioner training initiatives facilitate widespread implementation. The recorded activity serves as an example of best practices by integrating the Welsh language into familiar routines, which aids both language development and emotional well-being.

Future practices should continue to embed Welsh into daily experiences, prioritize workforce development, and ensure consistent alignment with early years frameworks and strategic plans. Reflective observation and assessment of children's engagement with the language, as recommended by Estyn and Social Care Wales, will be crucial for maintaining progress in multilingual and bilingual early years education.

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