

Critical response to an article that provides evidence of sound knowledge and understanding of themes related to the teaching of Welsh in the English-medium sector.

The purpose of this paper will be to identify the critical aspects of second language learning and acquisition, not only within Wales but internationally. An essential topic throughout will be bilingualism, centring specifically around the definitions, the variety of approaches used within education as well as a glimpse into how bilingual learners perform in comparison to monolingual learners. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the topic, there will be a critical response to an article which reviews and reflects upon non-native English students learning in English. The discussion will aim to explore main themes that are generally related to teaching and learning a second language; it will then be possible to compare the research and approaches available internationally to how language is taught in Wales. Ideally, an opportunity will be created to consider the impact adopting different approaches could have on the teaching and learning of the Welsh language and why doing so could have a positive or negative effect on the development of a bilingual Wales. Welsh Government (2010) state that they wish to create a country in which “people may choose to live their lives through the medium of either or both Welsh or English and where the presence of the two languages is a source of pride and strength to us all”. Over the years there have been many definitions of bilingualism as it is a challenging concept to define; this is because there is no one agreed-upon explanation of how skilled one must be within a language to be considered bilingual (Ng and Wigglesworth, 2007). Although this is the case, many have proposed varying views; one example is from Bloomfield, at an extreme end, who suggests that in order to be bilingual you should have ‘native control’ of the language, and on the other end of the spectrum, with the minimalist view is Diebold, who believes merely knowing a few phrases of a language can be classed as a form of bilingualism (Baker, 2001, p.6).

Before this analysis begins, it is first important to consider the difference between language learning and language acquisition. When contemplating the meaning of language acquisition it is suggested that a second language is developed in a similar way to the individual’s native language; the child would supposedly need to be exposed to the language, preferably on a daily basis, focusing mainly on the communication aspect in a natural, unforced way in an attempt to soothe rather than amplify their anxiety (Schutz, 2007, p.1-3). It is stated by Iorwerth (2017, p.3) that ‘language is acquired quickly and naturally between the ages of 0-5’. Many consider this to be the optimum age for learning a second language (Harding-Esch and Riley, 2003; Lyon, 1996) however Krashen (2003) implies that it is still possible to fully acquire a language in the teenage years and under certain circumstances even after reaching adulthood. “Learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition” (Shütz, 2007, p.3). On the other hand, language learning has been classified as a less important and more demanding form of developing language which is centred around formal instruction whereby learners focus on aspects such as grammatical rules and have their errors corrected; in other words learners develop their knowledge about the language rather than interact with it (Krashen, 1981).

A vital factor to consider when discussing language acquisition and learning are the motivations behind the learner's decision to improve and develop their ability to communicate in a second language. The paper 'Non-native English students learning in English' by Bernardo and Gaerlan, hereafter referred to as Article A, almost exclusively focuses on Filipino-English bilinguals. Although this could be considered somewhat bias, it is a useful tool which allows specific comparisons to be made concerning the teaching and learning of a second language in Wales and other countries. Article A explores the main reasons Filipino bilingual learners wish to develop English as a second language; these reasons included, but were not limited to, dreams of travelling to English speaking countries and experiencing different cultures, improving their chances of accessing what they perceive to be as prestigious higher education institutions and qualifying for particular jobs or professional advancements (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011, p.1-2). In comparison, Welsh, a minority language, is not as prominent as English, an international language, and therefore offers fewer opportunities to those who speak it; this may decrease a learner's motivation to develop the language. Although this is the case, Estyn (2017) state that having Welsh as a second language, alongside other benefits, can enrich the learners experience of life within and outside of Wales, give them more opportunities in relation to employment, heighten their understanding of diversity and, as a bilingual, could advance their cognitive abilities. On top of this Welsh Government (2012, p.16) has a plan to reinforce the importance of learning the Welsh language by enforcing six strategies to educate people on the importance of using Welsh and creating more opportunities regarding its use, be they related to the workplace, community, school or family.

Within Article A it is mentioned that some areas in the world have changed the language used to teach within schools from the primary/native language to English; English has been the main medium of instruction within Filipino schools for almost 100 years; however, the majority of Filipinos do not consider English to be their first language (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011, p.2). In Wales there are three main types of bilingual education used; these consist of mainstream, in which pupils attend an English medium school and learn Welsh as a second language, immersion, where learners who speak English at home are educated through the medium of Welsh, and finally maintenance/heritage, where learners speak Welsh at home and go to a Welsh-medium school (McCarty, 2012). Considering these forms of education, it would seem the article is focusing upon immersion bilingualism in which they are taught with an emphasis on their second language. This links to research undertaken in Wales relating to the different forms of bilingualism, including immersion and maintenance/heritage.

"The research indicated that their home language was the language in which children were strongest, be that Welsh or English, indicating that although they might become proficient in both languages through school, the use of their stronger language was, however, preferred outside the classroom."

(Rhys, 2014)

Adopting the immersion approach through the entirety of Wales would be an extremely taxing approach and would be an unrealistic aim as it would require each teacher to be

fluent and confident in the Welsh language; “English is the main language of 77% of childcare providers; whilst 13% are Welsh medium, and 10% are bilingual” (Iorwerth, 2017, p.3).

When the writer undertook a professional teaching experience, it was noticeable that many teachers within the foundation phase often attempted to communicate with the children in Welsh, all the while introducing new sentence structures, using repetition and ensuring each child engaged with the language in one form or another on a daily basis. However, when observing the classrooms within key stage 2, it was clear that the use of Welsh had dropped significantly; the teachers within these classrooms rarely interacted with learners in Welsh, and any form of communication or lesson seemed tokenistic instead of designed to develop the learners use and understanding of the language. Although this may not be the case in every school, it certainly emphasises the importance of the role of the teacher within bilingual education. This is supported within Article A; teachers were mentioned as ‘models’ of good English and were deemed to have a large impact and influence on the learners use of language (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011). According to Estyn (2013) in order for learners to be successful, teachers need to ensure that they allocate ample time to the direct teaching of Welsh, monitor progress, give verbal feedback, plan engaging activities both in and outdoors while always improving their own language skills and using incidental Welsh where possible. Furlong (2015) proposes “that there should be an increased focus on the use of the Welsh language in all schools”.

Article A investigates both the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives of language acquisition and considers the impact bilingualism has on learners as well as what influences their language development. The psycholinguistic approach views learning as using external sources such as teachers, peers, books etcetera, to gather information and combine it with prior knowledge in order to develop a deeper understanding of the topic; when this is complete, the learner should be able to share the knowledge they have acquired in a clear and concise manner (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011; Harley, 2010). Studies within the article found that bilingual learners benefitted from changing between languages while completing cognitive tasks as it allowed them to access a wider scope of prior knowledge; this suggests that bilinguals may perform better than monolinguals in certain activities (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011). It has also been proposed that bilingualism has positive cognitive effects and aids learners to develop further languages much easier than monolingual learners would (Bangor University, 2007; Weaver, 2013). It has also been suggested that bilingual learners purposefully code switch between languages in order to benefit their learning experience and help them produce creative and elaborate ideas; “teaching should affirm the importance of using languages strategically or by design, depending on the requirements of the different learning tasks or activities” (Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011). The sociolinguistic perspective attempts to analyse the learner’s language experience from a personal and social point of view. Within this aspect of learning it was found that family was classed as a positive influence on the majority of students; as well as this it became clear that successful learners used their experiences with media such as books, social media and television to aid their learning and design their own language use for different contexts (Krashen, 2003; Bernardo and Gaerlan, 2011; Towell and Hawkins, 1994; Ng and Wigglesworth, 2007).

In conclusion there seems to be sufficient research that bilingual learners have some enhanced cognitive functions and selective attention compared to their monolingual counterpart; “developmental studies have emphasised the positive cognitive effects of knowing more than one language” (Bangor University, 2007). It has also become clear how essential it is that teachers have a positive attitude towards second language acquisition and learning within Wales as they are one of the main influences on the learner’s development (Freeman, 1998). Estyn (2007) recommend that the number of teachers who specialise in the Welsh language should be expanded to ensure learners are receiving an accurate insight into efficient communication. “Welsh should be used naturally so that it forms an integral part of classroom/whole school activity” (Roberts et al. 1998); by using it as a cross curricular approach it helps learners engage with the activities in a creative manner and remember aspects they wouldn’t in a purely language based lesson as they are having the opportunity to communicate in Welsh more naturally (Barnes, 2018). “If languages are taught hand-in-hand with another subject, the teaching and learning experience will be enhanced and enriched, and children will have a deeper understanding of both subjects” (Association for Language Learning, 2017).

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