

Encouraging increased everyday use of the Welsh language

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Introduction

Welsh differs from most European languages in that almost every first language speaker of Welsh is also totally fluent in English. It is quite possible for a British visitor to travel to a rural area of France or Spain where local people simply do not speak English. The visitor must do their best to be understood in whatever words of French or Spanish they can manage. However, if a reasonably proficient Welsh language student goes into a shop in Caernarfon or Dolgellau and tries to use the language, the shopkeeper is very likely to change into English as this seems easier than struggling to communicate with someone who is not totally fluent. This paper addresses the question:

How can the language strategies of Welsh learners and native Welsh speakers be developed in ways which encourage meaningful communication and increased use of the Welsh language in everyday life?

This issue is by no means restricted to Welsh. In Britain, learners of other Celtic languages such as Scottish or Irish Gaelic may have difficulty in actually using the language in the community. Elsewhere in Europe, minority languages may be dominated by national languages which are almost exclusively spoken. For example, Catalan is dominated by Spanish, and Flemish is dominated by Dutch (Federal Union of European Nationalities, 2022).

The status of Welsh

Historically, the Welsh language has been oppressed. During the industrial revolution, coal miners could lose their jobs for speaking Welsh in the mines. Many of the industries were operated by English owners and managers who did not speak the language, and were probably suspicious of their Welsh workforce. Welsh came to be seen as an obstacle to obtaining work and a career. Speaking Welsh was forbidden in many schools, and pupils caught speaking Welsh could receive a beating from the headmaster.

By the mid-twentieth century, the Welsh language had suffered a severe decline and remained strong only in the western agricultural areas which were furthest from English influence. This situation led to protest movements in support of the language, driven by anger at the forced eviction of a Welsh speaking community from the Tryweryn valley to allow the construction of a reservoir to supply water to Liverpool.

In 1982, a successful protest campaign resulted in the creation of a Welsh language television channel. Eventually, pressure on the Government led to official language laws being implemented. The Welsh Language Act of 1993 put the language on an equal footing with English. It obliges all public sector organisations who provide a service to the public in Wales, to do so in both Welsh and English. The Welsh Language Measure of 2011 went further in establishing that the Welsh language should not be treated less favourably than English. An employer must not discriminate against a Welsh speaker, nor prevent them from speaking Welsh in the workplace.

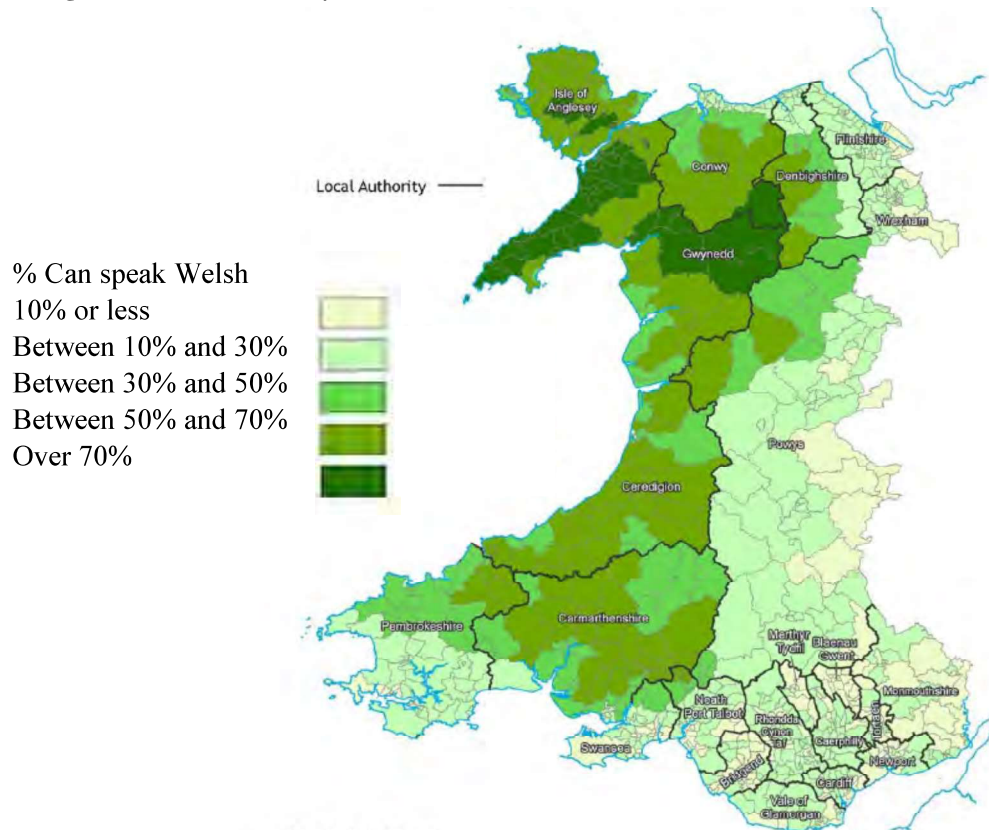


Figure 1: Percentages of people (over age 3) able to speak Welsh as recorded by the 2011 Census. Statistics for Wales (2013).

The future of the Welsh language

It is considered that the legislative work to protect the Welsh language has now been largely completed. An ambitious target has been set by the Welsh Government to reach a total of 1 million Welsh speakers by the year 2050. In support of this objective, considerable funding has been put into creating Welsh medium primary and secondary schools. A range of Welsh language courses are provided in the workplace, and evening classes are organised in the community. Funding has also been provided to Further Education colleges and Welsh universities to support bilingual training courses and degree studies in a range of subjects.

Evidence from census data collected in the past two decades still shows a strong division of the country, with a substantially higher percentage of Welsh speakers in the western counties (Fig.1). Recent data from the 2021 census suggests a small decline in the number

of Welsh speakers in the west, perhaps due to young people migrating away from rural areas to the cities of South Wales or England where employment choices are greater. However, this is balanced by an increase in the percentages of Welsh speakers in south Wales and the border counties, perhaps due to increased opportunities to learn the language in schools and in classes in the community.

Everyday use of Welsh

Whilst the census data provides percentages of the population in different areas who consider themselves able to speak Welsh, it gives no indication of their degree of fluency in the language. Furthermore, it gives no indication of the amount of Welsh that people actually use in their daily lives: at work, at home, or during leisure activities. Some insight into these questions is provided by the Welsh Language Use Survey of 2020 (Fig.2).

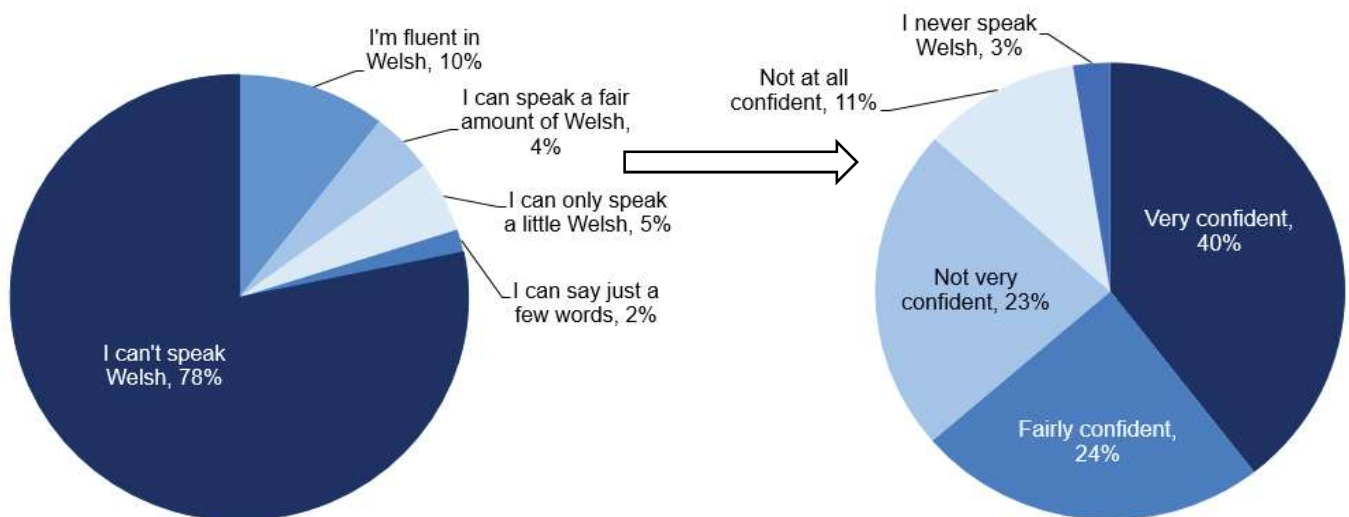


Figure 2: Welsh Language Use Survey, 2020. (left) Ability of members of the population to speak Welsh. (right) For people able to speak at least some Welsh, their level of confidence when communicating in the language. Welsh Government (2022).

Around 21% of the population in Wales can speak at least some Welsh. About 10% state that they are fluent, corresponding with the group who say that they are very confident speakers. Unsurprisingly, confidence in speaking the language declines with level of knowledge. Further findings were that 12% of the population spoke Welsh daily, with a further 4% speaking the language at least weekly.

Encouraging the use of Welsh

It is clear that whilst the Welsh language has a secure base in Wales, there is a long way to go to make the language a normal form of everyday communication across the country.

A number of Welsh language tutors and learners have offered practical suggestions for increasing the daily use of Welsh, often based on their own experiences or practitioner research. A range of these suggestions are given below.

Welsh language classes

Confidence in using Welsh in public is closely linked to level of fluency. Use of the language in daily life is likely to increase if learners continue to attend classes and develop their speaking ability.

Many employers in Wales now organise work-related Welsh courses for their staff (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2021). This is particularly the case in public-facing roles. For example: specialist Welsh language courses are available for teachers, nurses and other NHS staff, and for police officers. The courses help staff to work more effectively with first language Welsh speakers who may feel more confident communicating in Welsh, particularly in stressful situations.

Interest in learning Welsh has increased, and many people attend evening classes organised locally. Some students find it convenient to learn Welsh on-line, with a flexibility to study at times which fit with their other commitments. A number of on-line courses for beginners and more advanced learners are available, such as: Duolingo, and Say Something in Welsh.

For Welsh learners wishing to acquire the language more rapidly, residential and summer schools provide an immersive experience over a number of days. Courses are arranged at the main Welsh universities, and at the national language centre at Nant Gwrtheyrn.

Young families

Survey results indicate that the majority of Welsh speakers who now consider themselves fluent began to learn the language at an early age, generally within a Welsh speaking family. Parents of young children can therefore play a crucial role in helping their children become bilingual.

At a pre-school age, children in Wales can attend playgroups run by the Ysgolion Meithryn organisation, which operates through the medium of Welsh. At home, parents can organise activities such as games using Welsh language. It is important that Welsh is seen as a fun way to communicate, so that children develop a good attitude towards the language.

Perhaps the most important step that parents can take in promoting bilingualism is to send their children to Welsh medium schools (Cairns, 2015). An increasing number of Welsh medium primary and secondary schools are provided across the country, and have good educational standards. Outside of school, older children can join youth organisations such as the Urdd, which was established to promote the Welsh language. The Urdd organises eisteddfodau with competitions in a number of cultural fields such as singing, music performance, drama and dance. It also operates outdoor activity centres in the Welsh mountains and on the coast.

Organisations using the Welsh language

A very good way for adults to meet Welsh speakers socially is to join an organisation that conducts its activities through the medium of Welsh. There are a number of such organisations spread across Wales. The Merched y Wawr is the equivalent of the Womens' Institute in England and organises, for example, talks by guest speakers and visits to places of interest. A number of choirs primarily use the Welsh language, and include Welsh songs and hymns in their repertoires. In strongly Welsh speaking areas there are sports clubs and walking groups where Welsh is the main language of communication.

In a number of towns and villages across Wales, informal Welsh medium discussion groups have been set up by Welsh language tutors or learners. These groups may meet weekly in a local café or pub, and hold discussions on topics which are often of local interest.

Cultural activities through the medium of Welsh

There are many opportunities available in the arts which allow Welsh learners to increase their language skills and gain a greater understanding and appreciation of Welsh culture.

Radio and television provide current affairs programmes and dramas in the Welsh language, often from a uniquely Welsh perspective. Television sub-titles in either Welsh or English are usually available, and can be helpful for learners.

A wide variety of novels in Welsh are available from libraries, book shops, or by mail order from the Welsh Books Council which was established to support Welsh authors and publishers.

Welsh language films and live theatre events are presented in the main cities of South Wales, and also tour venues in the regions such as the Aberystwyth Arts Centre and Theatre Clywyd. Learners may find these events difficult to follow, so it can be helpful to attend with a group led by a Welsh tutor who can provide an introduction and summary.

Wales has a very lively Welsh language music scene, with individual singers and bands performing at live venues, and music festivals such as Sesiwn Fawr in Dolgellau. These events are popular with the Welsh speaking younger generation.

Using Welsh when meeting new people

When learners have gained a reasonable level of ability in the language, they are faced with the challenge of using their communication skills in everyday life. This requires a good level of confidence. Encouragement from an enthusiastic and supportive tutor can be the key to success. The tutor may suggest a number of strategies:

Learners should set themselves tasks, such as purchasing some items from a shop, or asking for directions to some local landmark (BBC S4C, 2020). They will then approach an

appropriate person and begin the conversation by making their request in Welsh. At this point, one of several things may happen:

- The person may be a fluent Welsh speaker and be happy to continue the conversation, speaking in clear and simple language to help the learner. This would be a very good outcome.
- The person may be a fluent Welsh speaker but revert to English to continue the conversation, deciding that this was easier than struggling to communicate with someone who was not fluent in the language. The learner should then say, in Welsh which they had practised beforehand, that they were trying hard to learn the language and would like to practise so that they can improve. Given this explanation, most fluent speakers will be reassured and will continue in Welsh.
- The person may simply say that they do not understand Welsh. This may possibly be the case, but people who have lived in Wales for a few years have probably absorbed more of the language than they realise. If the learner persists and continues to make their request in simple Welsh, perhaps accompanied by hand gestures, the person is quite likely to understand what is being requested. This can lead to a sense of success and satisfaction, and may encourage the person questioned to take a greater interest in the Welsh language in the future.

A national scheme has been introduced to have a day each year, known as Shwmae Day, when Welsh learners will try to start and continue all conversations in Welsh (Monmouthshire County Council, 2022).

Increasing fluency when speaking

It is quite possible that a Welsh learner formulates an idea in their mind during a conversation, but is unable to transmit this in Welsh to the recipient because they cannot think of the necessary vocabulary or grammar. The conversation is then interrupted by an uncomfortable pause. Several strategies are available to increase the fluency of conversations:

- A first option is for the speaker to quickly reformulate their thoughts into simpler language. For example, the idea: 'I am anxious that the central heating boiler is not functioning correctly' might be changed to the simpler sentence: 'I think there is a problem with the hot water'. This approach is similar to translanguaging (Williams, 1999).
- Another technique, frequently used even by native Welsh speakers, is to introduce English words when the Welsh vocabulary is unknown or does not come immediately to mind. For example, the sentence: 'Mae gen i central heating boiler newydd' introduces English words to maintain the fluency of the conversation. This technique is referred to as 'Wenglish'.
- The learner prepares and practices various pieces of Welsh on common topics, which can then be fitted into a conversation as appropriate, and delivered fluently. The

topics might be, for example: information about the learner's family, what the learner does at work, or details of some leisure activity they enjoy. This technique is known as 'creating islands' (Shekhtman, 2012).

Welsh in the workplace

Central to increasing the everyday use of Welsh is to normalise the use of the language in the workplace, both between staff and in conversations with customers and clients. During a visit a few years ago to the Trawsfynydd nuclear power station, I was slightly surprised to find that Welsh was the normal everyday language of the engineering staff. Indeed, a Dutch nuclear engineer undertaking a placement at Trawsfynydd was enthusiastically learning Welsh in order to feel more included within the team.

There are a number of steps that an employer can take to encourage the use of Welsh by their staff. An obvious first step is to provide language classes. These can be made specific to the roles carried out by staff. Different areas of vocabulary might be commonly used by office, shop, factory or transport workers. However, it is perhaps best to retain the English words for specialist technical terms used by professions such as: doctors, computer programmers or motor mechanics. Whilst Welsh translations of these terms exist, they would not be widely known to Welsh speakers (Hall, 2014).

Support can be given to Welsh learners in the workplace by providing a fluent mentor to whom they can go for language advice. Many organisations also employ professional translators who can prepare written documents in Welsh or provide Welsh text for web pages or Powerpoint presentations.

Having a Welsh speaking staff can be an asset to companies operating in Wales, both in meeting the needs of Welsh speaking clients and in providing a positive image of the business to visitors. A scheme is operated by the Welsh Government to supply badges and lanyards which indicate that a member of staff is happy to speak Welsh with customers. 'Welsh spoken here' signs are also available for display on shop counters and hotel reception desks.

Reading and writing opportunities in Welsh

With the introduction of the Welsh Language Act, Government departments are obliged by law to provide postal and on-line information and official forms in both English and Welsh. Whilst many Welsh speakers feel confident to read information, they may be reluctant to complete a form in Welsh for fear of misunderstanding a question or making a mistake in their answer, which could have serious consequences. A solution is to place the English and Welsh versions of the form alongside each other, and to check the meanings of questions before answering in Welsh.

A number of college students choose to sit A-level examinations through the medium of Welsh in a variety of subjects. The students are always provided with both the Welsh and

English versions of the examination paper, so that they may check the exact meaning of questions before beginning their answers.

There are increasing opportunities for Welsh speakers to use the language for business transactions. Banks provide cash machines, and supermarkets provide self-service checkouts. Both have options to select a Welsh language dialogue as an alternative to English.

In recent years there has been a huge growth in the use of on-line social media, and this has been very beneficial in encouraging the use of written Welsh. Attitudes seem to be changing, with less reluctance to write in Welsh for fear of making grammatical errors. Many users, particularly young people, are willing to give Welsh their 'best shot', which is very healthy for the future of the language.

A good tool when needing to write in Welsh is the Google Translate application, which has improved greatly in recent years and now generally provides very accurate translations. As a check, the program can be asked to translate the generated Welsh text back into English, to ensure that the meaning is as the user intended. Another useful editing tool is the Cysill grammar checking program produced by Bangor University.

Conclusion

Use of the Welsh language across Wales seems to be at a plateau point. The long period of decline has been halted, but significant growth has not yet begun. Both the Westminster and Welsh governments have supported the language through legislation, and provide funding for language courses. The next steps seem to be in the hands of the people of Wales.

A crucial factor is to develop the confidence of Welsh learners to use the language in everyday situations. There is a strong link between confidence in speaking and level of achievement in Welsh. A first priority is therefore to encourage learners to continue with their studies, whether in classes linked to their work or classes in the community. Additional activities through the medium of Welsh will be beneficial, from watching television programmes and reading novels, to taking part in societies or discussion groups.

Encouraging Welsh learners to actually use the language in everyday situations will require the sympathetic support of fluent Welsh speakers. Efforts to use the language must be congratulated, and the perfectionist attitudes of some Welsh language purists put to one side, if the language is to flourish.

The Welsh language will be particularly valued if it is learned from an early age in the home or at junior school. Parents, whether Welsh speaking or not, can play an important role in helping their children to develop bilingual skills. Gaining such skills is sure to be of value in adult life, as well as benefitting a bilingual Wales.

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