Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Welsh language acquisition: Government response

Our response to Estyn's report and recommendations on Welsh language acquisition.

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Report details

Estyn was asked to identify how Welsh-medium and bilingual settings and primary schools develop learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Summary of main findings

The key findings of the report are:

Learning and provision for skills

In settings, most children make strong progress from their starting points and acquire the Welsh language effectively. Many learners in most non-maintained settings and primary schools develop their listening skills effectively. They do so by listening attentively to practitioners who introduce vocabulary and syntactic patterns to them in purposeful oral activities. This contributes to the process of acquiring and enriching language as they imitate the language with increasing confidence across the age range.

Most learners from all linguistic backgrounds interact well with practitioners and their peers as they develop the confidence to communicate in Welsh. They use the language regularly by internalising, speaking and applying it with increasing

confidence to communicate spontaneously in Welsh in a variety of formal and less formal contexts.

Many learners develop their phonological knowledge with increasing confidence in a range of engaging activities across the curriculum. Many practitioners guide learners to hear, recognise and pronounce the sounds of letters of the alphabet accurately. Through shared reading activities with adults and their peers, learners revisit and rehearse their skills in segmenting and combining increasingly complex words. As a result, most make sound progress in their reading skills over time.

In the foundation phase, most learners begin to understand and recognise the link between spoken language and phonological sounds, and they become familiar with high-frequency words. In key stage 2, many learners read unfamiliar words and form increasingly complex sentences. As learners gain confidence and make progress in their reading skills, they discuss a wider variety of topics.

Many learners develop their advanced reading skills successfully. They also read text and gather information in one language, and collate, discuss and record the information in another language, usually Welsh or English. This develops learners' translanguaging skills and supports the development of their Welsh reading skills.

Many settings and schools foster a culture of reading through a well-developed whole-school reading strategy. In the best practice, practitioners provide an engaging and stimulating range of texts for learners. In these providers, learners have access to a specific reading area in the classroom or a school library, where they develop their reading skills independently. In less effective schools, a minority of practitioners in key stage 2 do not provide frequent enough opportunities for learners to listen to others reading Welsh literature and poetry. As a result, a few learners have limited knowledge of Welsh texts and authors, and are not confident to discuss them.

In most schools, many learners develop their writing skills successfully. In the foundation phase, most practitioners promote learners' writing skills by creating a clear link between listening and speaking, and writing. In key stage 2, many learners develop their skills further by writing increasingly complex sentences.

They enhance their work with rich vocabulary and use a wide range of punctuation accurately, when writing different types of texts. As most learners' oral skills develop, this has a positive effect on their writing ability. Currently, a minority of learners do not develop their writing skills to the same standard as their speaking and reading skills. A few practitioners do not provide enough opportunities for learners to write freely and independently, or plan purposefully enough for learners to use their existing knowledge to extend their writing skills further.

In many settings and schools, most learners apply their literacy skills consistently across the curriculum. When given an opportunity to do so, most develop their oral skills well in a variety of situations and use the Welsh language accurately. They develop their reading skills progressively by reading fiction and non-fiction texts on an interesting range of themes, for example when learning about Welsh heroes. Many learners across the school develop their writing skills in other areas of learning, for example by using imperative verbs when writing simple instructions to make fruit kebabs in the foundation phase.

Most learners have positive attitudes towards developing their Welsh language skills. They are proud to communicate in Welsh, and understand the value and benefit of developing their Welsh language skills. In the best practice, many providers take advantage of every opportunity for learners to use the language interactively and practically within the school and the local community. By doing so, learners from all linguistic backgrounds use and apply the language competently in a variety of purposeful activities, for example by helping elderly residents from a local residential home to develop their ability to communicate with their families and friends using digital devices.

In most settings and schools, learners who are identified as being disadvantaged or having special educational needs (SEN) make good progress from their starting points in acquiring the Welsh language. In most providers, they receive appropriate support, and most achieve their personal language targets. Practitioners plan detailed support programmes that meet nearly all learners' general learning needs successfully. However, there is no consistent support for groups of learners with specific language needs, such as global language delay and dyslexia, through the medium of Welsh, or suitable resources available for practitioners to use when supporting all groups of

learners, particularly SEN learners.

Many practitioners plan rich linguistic activities that engage and hold learners' interest. In the best practice, a majority plan to develop learners' language skills progressively as they move through the setting and school. A few practitioners do not enable learners to advance the full range of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, in meaningful and interesting contexts across the curriculum.

In many providers, practitioners immerse learners in the Welsh language by modelling language well and providing a learning environment that is rich in Welsh vocabulary and syntax. These settings and schools take pride in being communities with a Welsh-speaking ethos. Over time, a majority of practitioners broaden the range of vocabulary and syntactic patterns that learners use. In a minority of providers, practitioners do not immerse learners enough in the Welsh language or ensure that developments in one skill, for example speaking, to support and complement the development in another, such as writing.

Providers that excel in developing learners' language acquisition offer helpful support for groups of learners. They organise language-rich activities to meet the linguistic needs of learners from all linguistic backgrounds. In general, few schools specifically target developing further the skills of learners from Welsh-speaking homes or those identified as more able.

In many settings and schools where teaching is effective, practitioners develop learners' vocabulary skilfully. This is a strength of the provision and a consistent means of ensuring that learners use and apply increasingly mature and extensive spoken and written language in Welsh lessons and across the curriculum as they move through the school.

Most practitioners' skills in teaching language and literacy are a strength. They introduce new vocabulary and syntactic patterns ably in rich activities that are planned well. A few practitioners' own communication skills are not secure enough to support learners to use the Welsh language correctly.

Generally, many practitioners question, monitor and track learners' progress effectively, and plan relevant activities that meet most learners' developmental needs. However, the tracking procedures in a minority of schools do not ensure

that all groups of learners make enough progress in developing their Welsh skills over time.

Leadership

In a majority of settings and schools in which standards of language and literacy are high for all learners, leaders establish a clear vision and a strategic approach to developing learners' Welsh language and literacy skills in an inclusive learning environment. They have high expectations and plan a wide range of opportunities to deepen and support learners from all linguistic backgrounds to take pride in the Welsh language, and use it naturally and spontaneously as part of their education and everyday lives.

In the most effective schools, leaders develop a strong collaborative culture in which all members of staff have access to and benefit from the school's collective immersion methodology of acquiring a language. They invest in practitioners' skills and expertise through high quality professional learning, which develops their understanding of the best way to develop learners' language and literacy skills.

In the most effective schools, leaders develop robust procedures to evaluate the impact of teaching and learning experiences on learners' progress. In schools where professional development for language teaching is less well developed, although leaders monitor generic aspects of teaching, they do not focus closely enough on subject-specific aspects of language teaching. This makes it difficult for leaders to identify precisely practitioners 'professional learning needs so that these can be addressed to ensure that staff are more able to develop learners' language and literacy skills. In a few schools, leaders do not always ensure that practitioners are good language role models for learners.

Recommendation 1: Non-maintained settings, nursery and primary schools should plan carefully for continuity and progression in the skill development of learners from all linguistic backgrounds as they acquire the Welsh language.

Recommendation 2: Non-maintained settings, nursery and primary

schools should provide regular listening and speaking activities to develop learners' vocabulary and syntactic patterns, and encourage them to apply these new skills in formal and less formal activities.

Recommendation 3: Non-maintained settings, nursery and primary schools should track rigorously the progress, vocabulary development and language acquisition of specific groups of learners, including the more able.

Recommendation 4: Primary schools should provide opportunities for learners to listen to, read and appreciate Welsh literature and poetry by Welsh authors, particularly in key stage 2.

Recommendation 5: Primary schools should ensure regular opportunities for learners to write freely and independently.

Welsh Government Response to recommendations 1 to 5

These recommendations are for non-maintained settings, nursery and primary schools and we accept their content.

We welcome these recommendations as they mirror our own expectations for all learners to develop high level literacy skills during their time at school, regardless of linguistic background. The Curriculum for Wales guidance framework, published in January 2020, is at the heart of our national mission to raise standards for all. It sets out clear principles of progression which are intended to guide schools to develop a curriculum which reflects appropriate learner progression across the Areas of Learning and Experience. The Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience also contains a continuum for languages starting with little or no language and progressing to fluency. Assessment will be used to understand how learners are progressing and the support they may need. It will be for schools to decide how this progression will be monitored or tracked. We will support all schools and settings through recovery from the experiences of the last year towards curriculum reform and realisation.

Recommendation 6: Local authorities and regional consortia should provide training to deepen practitioners' understanding of how learners acquire the Welsh language, and in effective language immersion methodology.

Welsh Government Response to recommendation 6

We regularly engage with local authorities and regional consortia and will draw their attention to this recommendation placed on them by this report. The Curriculum Implementation Plan, published in January 2021 sets out clear roles and responsibilities for regional consortia and other partner organisations. This includes provision of a professional learning programme and bespoke support for schools and settings. These will be developed in line with the vision of the four purposes of the curriculum ensuring every learner benefits from a broad and balanced education with high expectations for all, regardless of background.

Recommendation 7: The Welsh Government should develop national guidelines on language immersion in order to support teaching and learning in Welsh language acquisition.

Welsh Government Response to recommendation 7

The Curriculum guidance sets out our approach to literacy and language acquisition and the Descriptions of learning set out clear progression for learners. We will be working with stakeholders to develop guidance and further resources to support the teaching and learning of Welsh as part of the new curriculum and to provide professional learning opportunities. Attention will be given to immersion methodology as part of this work. Also the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans continue to inform discussions around Welsh language immersion, as well as late immersion provision, to identify areas needing further support.

Publication details

The report was published on 04 March 2021 and is **available on Estyn's website**.

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