RESEARCH

Late immersion and intensive language provision: quick scoping review (summary)

A quick scoping review of the evidence available relating to late immersion and intensive language provision.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of a quick scoping review (QSR) of evidence relating to late immersion, intensive language learning, and language provision for pupils who have experienced a break or interruption in their immersion experience.

The review provides information about the volume and characteristics of the evidence that was found, and an overview of what that evidence tells us.

Research aims

The aim of the review was to identify research that discusses methods, approaches or interventions relating to late immersion and intensive language learning, and that is relevant to the current context of the Welsh language in education in Wales. It draws on evidence relating to the Welsh language in Wales, and to contexts and languages that provide meaningful points of reference for the Welsh language in education.

The primary research question that informed the study was as follows:

'What is the evidence about language provision for pupils who are educated in a language that is different from their home language, and who are exposed to that language for the first time at a stage after the beginning of formal education?'

The secondary research questions were:

What is the evidence relating to provision for:

1. Pupils who have experienced interrupted learning, and
2. Pupils in language immersion settings?'

The review was conducted in-house in Knowledge and Analytical Services, Welsh Government, with support from the Welsh Government Library Services.

Policy context

Late entry points to Welsh-medium education have been in existence in Wales for a number of years. There are a number of late immersion centres across Wales that offer an intensive language acquisition programme for latecomers to the Welsh language. A variety of late immersion programmes have also been piloted and delivered within schools. Providing entry points to Welsh-medium education at stages beyond the early years has been a feature of immersion provision in Wales for a number of years. This provision is delivered in late immersion centres in several local authorities, and late immersion programmes have also been piloted and delivered within schools.

Current developments in relation to the planning and delivery of Welsh-medium provision highlight the continuing need for a fuller understanding of the contribution of late entry points to the strategic development of that provision. Proposed new arrangements are intended to assist local authorities and schools to plan their Welsh-medium education provision in such a way that supports the new Curriculum for Wales and the national goal of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. In the context of supporting local authorities and schools to plan for

increasing their Welsh-medium provision, it is important to draw on evidence relating to language immersion at stages beyond the early years.

The need to develop our understanding of the evidence base in relation to late immersion and intensive approaches to language acquisition has acquired an additional dimension during the last twelve months in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the education system continues to address learners' needs and support their progression, it is envisaged that some of the approaches and techniques used in late immersion and intensive language learning contexts will be relevant – notably in the case of learners whose main or sole exposure to the Welsh language is through school-based interactions, and whose contact with the language has been limited by pandemic-related restrictions.

Methodology

There were three phases to the QSR: Protocol Development, Searches and Synthesis. The literature searches, undertaken by the Welsh Government Library Services, yielded a total of 270 research items. After three screening stages, 46 research items were included in the synthesis. The synthesis provides a narrative of what the evidence indicates in relation to the research questions, and suggests potential areas where further research and evidence could be beneficial.

The review did not include an assessment of the quality and robustness of the evidence that was identified. The findings of the research discussed need to be approached with that in mind, and recommendations in relation to policy implementation have not been included. The review concludes, however, with suggestions for areas where consideration could be given to further and more detailed work. These considerations provide an insight into potential gaps in the evidence and have been categorised according to 'areas where evidence is available', 'areas where there is less evidence available', and 'emerging scenarios'.

The review was conducted between June 2020 and February 2021, with the majority of the work completed during July to September 2020, and January to February 2021.

Main findings

Optimal entry points: immersion education

Studies identified early immersion as preferable for language learning, but some researchers argue that there is no optimal age for an individual to begin their immersion journey. Rather, the 'optimal time' reflects parents' and children's individual preferences.

The research sets out optimal second language (L2) learning conditions. These conditions include having strong home literacy practices and sufficient time for L2 literacy practices at school. They also include having immersion practices that are well designed and implemented, and opportunities for children to use their L2 informally.

Late immersion interventions

Most of the research included in the report concludes that there was no detriment to the educational outcomes of pupils taking part in late immersion interventions. However, a study with Chinese speakers participating in a late-immersion intervention in Hong Kong found negative effects when considering non-language subjects studied through the medium of English. The authors suggest starting the immersion journey earlier, providing ongoing support for non-language subjects, and providing a sufficiently long transition period between primary and secondary education.

A study comparing early and late immersion participants in Ireland found that after three years of immersion, the late immersion students achieved similar grades to their early immersion counterparts. The early immersion participants had experienced approximately 10,000 hours of Irish immersion, whilst late immersion participants had experienced approximately 3,600 hours (since the beginning of secondary school). All participants reported English as their first language.

Research comparing late immersion programmes with alternatives such as

study abroad and regular classroom language learning practices for French lessons in the US found that students in the late immersion programme made more gains in their oral fluency than those studying abroad. The researchers state that using the L2 whilst participating in activities outside of the classroom was associated with gains in oral fluency and that the nature and quality of L2 interactions, as opposed to the context, promotes a variety of L2 learning.

Intensive language provision

From the evidence presented in the report, there was general agreement that intensive language provision produces better L2 communication skills than the same number of hours of language provision spread over a longer period of time. Research findings from Canada suggest a minimum of 250 hours are required for children learning French as a second language to communicate orally spontaneously.

A study compared Canadian students participating in an intensive language programme for learning French with their peers who did not participate in the programme, on their performance in English reading, writing and science. The study found that the students participating in 'intensive French' performed better than their peers in the regular programme. The study concluded that the extra time spent on intensive French provision had no impact on students' achievement in English. Once a period of intensive language learning is complete, the research suggests placing emphasis on a continuity of learning strategy. An evaluation of Welsh language immersion and intensive language teaching pilots notes that ongoing support in Year 7 was needed after pupils had participated in intensive language provision in Year 6. Suggestions for ongoing support included providing extra-curricular activities for pupils to be able to use their newly developed language skills outside the classroom.

Late immersion provision

Classroom approaches

There is a general agreement within the evidence presented that particular teaching strategies encourage students' communicative abilities. Communicative language teaching is one approach that aims to foster spontaneous oral communication in late French immersion in Canada. This approach is a collection of principles that apply to late immersion. Adopting communicative language teaching approaches provides students with opportunities to participate using 'real world tasks' and using the second language in an authentic way; this promotes collaboration, which in turn develops students' accuracy and fluency.

Findings included in the review note that teaching practices that encourage spontaneous oral communication include replicating authentic communication situations, making the curriculum pupil directed, and having high expectations of students.

Practitioners

Training and developing educators' skills is seen as a vital element of late immersion programmes. Findings note that practitioners need training in intensive language instruction and incorporating the child's first language into the classroom to support second language development. The research also notes that immersion teaching methodologies and how they are incorporated into the classroom is something that should be included in initial teacher training programmes.

Environments

Evidence suggests that external support mechanisms are seen as an important element of intensive language teaching provision. For example, targeted local authority support and guidance was a key factor for children to learn Welsh successfully through an intensive language-teaching pilot.

Parental support is important for communicating key messages about late immersion to parents, as is the case in example materials from late French immersion settings in Canada.

Time

There is a general agreement that time is a key factor in late immersion provision. Research included in the synthesis notes that late immersion programmes require time and effort but eventually lead to better learning outcomes when compared with programmes that spent less time on language learning. One study notes that sufficient time for L2 literacy introduction aids in supporting late immersion.

The evidence also notes that educators need adequate time to plan their late immersion provision whilst taking into consideration the dual aim of immersion education, which is to teach language and content simultaneously. Findings from the research state that immersion teachers require more programme-based support, which includes additional planning time because of the requirement to balance language and content material.

Pupils who have experienced interrupted learning

Children who have experienced interrupted learning come from a variety of language backgrounds, *and* might have been exposed to emotionally distressing situations such as conflict or natural disasters, as well as missing out on their education. Research on integrating children who have experienced interrupted learning found three practices that encourage successful language acquisition for latecomers. Firstly, considering prior educational experience and adapting programmes to student needs is key. Secondly, using 'teacher-created' materials provided students with the opportunity to develop linguistic practices. Finally, separate 'bilingual support classes' with teaching assistants provided opportunities for extended discussions. The teaching assistants became advocates for students both socially and academically, which helped with their academic transition.

In situations where learners have experienced a gap in their education, interventions such as translanguaging or integrating the home language into the curriculum through other means can support the development of L2 proficiency.

Amongst the evidence included in the review, is an example of the additional language lessons provided for newly arrived students to Australia who spoke English as an additional language. The example included remote learning taking place in the child's mother tongue using phone lessons, or platforms such as Skype or Moodle. Provision was also put in place for children who were unable to access an English language school or centre. Instead, these children could access the 'Virtual English as Additional Language New Arrivals Programme' where specialist English as additional language (EAL) teachers provided materials related to the mainstream curriculum.

Areas and considerations for further development

Areas where evidence is available

The synthesis provides evidence suggesting that late immersion can be a successful additional entry point for latecomers to education in a second language. The evidence presented discussed the importance of providing continued support for late immersion pupils transitioning from primary to secondary schools. The evidence also noted particular areas of best practice, for example adopting a communicative approach, providing practitioners with continued professional development, and the importance of support mechanisms such as senior management, local authorities and parents and carers.

Research findings from the QSR state that intensive language provision is more effective than the same hours of language provision over a longer time period. Evidence from the synthesis also emphasises the importance of having enough time to implement intensive language provision, and providing enough time for practitioners to be able to plan and develop resources.

It should be noted that the review did not involve assessing the strength or robustness of the evidence presented, and this would need to be taken into account as something to consider if future work were to be undertaken in this area.

Areas where there is less evidence available

Less evidence was available in relation to what particular methodologies or interventions are related to effective late immersion practices in Welsh-medium education. Research in this area could provide valuable information on the current late immersion provision on offer in Wales, as well as how effective the current provision is, and how it might be possible to increase this provision over time, an aim noted in Cymraeg 2050.

Emerging scenarios

Considering the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic could have an effect on children's language development in Welsh-medium immersion education could be an area of exploration for future projects. It would appear that more information is required to better understand what elements of a child's language learning experience need further support as they progress through the education system.

Some of the research items included in the QSR discussed using technology to facilitate late immersion provision to children who had experienced interrupted learning. These publications predate the COVID-19 pandemic and by now there is more awareness of the potential to expand the use of technology within education. Exploring the use of technology in late immersion could be an area for consideration in future work.

The review touches on the experiences of children experiencing interrupted learning. It was limited to considering the late immersion experiences of children who had also experienced situations such as natural disasters, conflict and immigration, and what this might mean for their language development. This topic was explored as it provided some parallels with the COVID-19 pandemic

and the changes in children's education because of limitations and interruptions to face-to-face learning (although important differences between the two contexts also need to be recognised).

The experiences of students with limited or interrupted formal education were included in the review in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to face-to-face learning. It would appear that considering the experiences of refugees and immigrants who settle in Wales and who attend late immersion Welsh-medium education could require further exploration as this was not explored in the QSR.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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