



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

# Supporting progression in language learning: assessment in the Curriculum for Wales (summary)

This report presents the findings of a study undertaken to explore how assessment for learning (AfL) can support learner progression in language learning.

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# Contents

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## Contents

[Research objectives and methodology](#)

[Assessment for Learning in Wales](#)

[Assessment for Learning in the language learning context](#)

[Areas for future consideration](#)

[Contact details](#)

## Research objectives and methodology

### Research objectives

The aim of the research project was to gain an understanding of how Assessment for Learning (AfL) can support learner progression in language learning within the Area of Learning and Experience: Languages, Literacy and Communication (LLC Area) in the Curriculum for Wales. The research objectives were:

- Objective A: to examine how AfL has been approached in statutory education in Wales to date, and how the need to further develop the field has been articulated.

This involved reviewing the evidence relating to how AfL has been put into practice to date in Wales, and the role of AfL within the current context of

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curriculum and assessment reform.

- Objective B: to examine how AfL has previously and is currently being put into practice in the context of language learning.

This involved undertaking a review of how AfL is applied to support learner progression in language learning, drawing on Wales-specific and international literature, and examining the opportunities, challenges and other considerations of AfL in the context of language learning.

- Objective C: To develop possible approaches to AfL to support progression in language learning in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022.

This involved exploring ways in which approaches to AfL can support the focus on learner progression in language learning in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022; appraising how AfL approaches could support the focus on developing learners' plurilingual repertoires, and exploring whether, and in what ways, the co-construction approach to the design of the Curriculum for Wales from 2022 could enhance or support the development of approaches to AfL.

The scope for developing Objective C was restricted as a result of the limitations of the evidence found, and the time constraints of the study. Observations in relation to this objective are presented as areas for future consideration in Chapter 5: Conclusions of the report.

The research was carried out in-house between October 2021 and January 2022 by a PhD intern in the Social Research and Information Division, with support from the Welsh Government Library Services. The study was undertaken as part of a four-month PhD internship organised through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Wales Doctoral Training Partnership and the Welsh Government.

## Policy context

The Curriculum for Wales is the new school curriculum for learners aged 3-16 years old in Wales, that is due to be implemented from Nursery to Year 6 in 2022 and rolled out year-by-year from Year 7 to Year 11 between 2022 and 2026. Owing to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, secondary schools

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will be able to delay their introduction of the new curriculum until 2023, as announced in July 2021, by Jeremy Miles MS, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language.

Languages, Literacy and Communication is one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience in the Curriculum for Wales, and encompasses the learning of Welsh, English, and international languages, including literature. In the Curriculum for Wales, learners are expected to move along a continuum of language learning. A focus on plurilingualism will allow learners to use their knowledge of languages to improve communication and to learn from the relationships that exist between languages. In the LLC Area, plurilingualism is understood as the knowledge, use and connections between languages, where learners may have varying proficiencies in these languages. The Welsh Government has a target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. An education system that increases the number of Welsh speakers is a key element of the Cymraeg 2050 strategy. The Welsh Government's plan, Global Futures: a Plan to Improve and Promote Modern Foreign Languages in Wales 2020 to 2022 aims to increase the numbers of learners learning languages, to support multilingualism, and support the teaching and learning of international languages for learners in Wales.

This study explores classroom assessment arrangements which aim to further learner progression. Widely known as Assessment for Learning, the term was coined by the Assessment Reform Group in 1999, and has featured widely in the literature relating to assessment arrangements in the UK and internationally. Since the term AfL was coined, the Welsh Government has used it in relation to curriculum assessment approaches, especially in the Curriculum for Wales from 2008.

Although the term AfL is not used in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022, the principles are implicit within the curriculum. A central element of the curriculum is learner progression along a learning continuum, with the recognition that each learner's pace of progression is different. The overarching purpose of assessment is to support learners in their progression. This report uses the term 'Assessment for Learning' to reflect the aim and research objectives of this study. The report uses both 'Assessment for Learning' and 'assessment to support learner progression' as terms to reflect the terminology used in the

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Wales-related literature and international literature.

## Methodology

For Research Objective A, a review of the literature in relation to AfL in statutory education in Wales was carried out in October 2021. This involved examining literature from the Welsh Government, education partners in Wales, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). After a screening stage, 52 items were included for synthesis. The synthesis for Research Objective A presents the evidence chronologically within three overarching timeframes: Curriculum for Wales from 1998, Curriculum for Wales from 2008, and Curriculum for Wales from 2022.

For Research Objective B, an evidence review of AfL in the language learning context was carried out between October and December 2021. The literature searches yielded 138 items. After three screening stages, 37 items were included in the synthesis. The synthesis for Research Objective B provides a summary of what the evidence indicates about AfL in the language learning context.

There are some methodological limitations to the study that need to be taken into account. The approach adopted for Research Objective A broadly followed the techniques of a literature review, with a limited number of key terms used to identify relevant items. Research Objective B involved using some of the techniques of a rapid evidence assessment, in relation to the approach taken in defining inclusion and exclusion criteria, and in searching and screening the evidence. However, it did not include a systematic process of assessing the quality and robustness of the items that were sourced. Also, the parameters set for the searches in the two reviews mean that there are some limitations to the depth and scope of the study and its findings. The study does not seek to provide a full and exhaustive picture of the literature surrounding AfL in the education system in Wales, nor of the existing research in relation to AfL in the context of language learning. It seeks to provide, rather, an indication of the evidence available, and provides a context for possible future development and further examination of the evidence.

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# Assessment for Learning in Wales (research Objective A): key findings

## Focus on Assessment for Learning in the Curriculum for Wales from 2008

The Wales-related evidence suggests that the term Assessment for Learning and its principles have played a central role in assessment approaches in the education system in Wales, especially during the Curriculum for Wales from 2008. The Developing Thinking and Assessment for Learning Programme was carried out during the early years of the Curriculum for Wales from 2008. During and following this programme, a number of Welsh Government documents were published to provide further guidance on AfL principles and practice, namely *Why Develop Thinking and Assessment for Learning in the Classroom?* and *How to Develop Thinking and Assessment for Learning in the Classroom*. During this time, ‘developing thinking’ and AfL strategies were often discussed together. Guidance was also provided to link AfL practice with the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework. Estyn, the OECD and the Welsh Government provide evidence that suggests that there was good practice in AfL occurring in schools, but AfL methods were underdeveloped in certain schools and the quality of AfL practice varied between settings.

## Assessment to support progression in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022

According to the evidence gathered, it seems that there has been a shift away from using the term Assessment for Learning in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022, towards using ‘learner progression’ in the context of assessment arrangements. However, the way in which certain elements of progression are understood in the Curriculum for Wales from 2022 mirrors the definition of AfL in the Curriculum for Wales from 2008. While AfL is no longer used as a term, it seems that its principles still underpin progression in the Curriculum for Wales 2022. The term AfL and its principles still appear to varying degrees within

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practice. For example, AfL is implied in the National Numeracy and Reading Online Personalised Assessments, and used explicitly in certain case studies for the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP). The international evidence gathered for Research Objective B also demonstrates that the term Assessment for Learning and its principles are still widely used in current research and practice.

## **Assessment for Learning in the language learning context (research Objective B): key findings**

### **Assessment for Learning for English language learning**

The international evidence gathered includes many items concerning AfL and the teaching of English as a second language. One item discusses Irish and another Kosraean but there are no items discussing other lesser used languages. The evidence that was examined as part of this study included no items which specifically explored AfL in relation to promoting and assessing plurilingualism.

### **Assessment for Learning for writing skills**

Many items consider the writing classroom. This study cannot come to firm conclusions regarding the evidence on the writing classroom, but there seems to be an emphasis in the literature on assessing writing skills rather than other skills.

### **Different language teaching methods (training)**

The study includes example of literature that explores AfL in relation to different language teaching approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning, communicative competence language learning, and intercultural

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language learning. The evidence suggests that teachers do not always have the necessary skills to assess language skills developed through such teaching approaches, and indicates the need for sufficient training for teachers to develop their understanding of AfL in relation to language learning.

## **Learner involvement**

The international evidence suggests that learners' language proficiency plays a role in the type of AfL practices that can be used. Certain AfL practices were found to be more appropriate for learners who had greater proficiency in a language, while learners' lack of language proficiency was a barrier to using certain AfL practices. It is also suggested in the international literature that learners' understanding of the assessment criteria and task has a positive effect on their learning. Furthermore, learners' active engagement in the assessment process is reported to be an important factor in order to develop AfL practice within the classroom. The evidence highlighted the need for learners to play an active role in assessment processes and noted the importance of learner voice in feedback practice.

Different AfL tools are discussed in the evidence gathered: assessment rubrics and criteria; computer-based assessment; portfolio work; self-assessment and peer-assessment; and scaffolding and monitoring. A few studies explore teachers' perceptions and practice of AfL in the language classroom, and some of these studies point towards the difference between teachers' overall positive beliefs about AfL and the challenges teachers they face when trying to implement AfL. Two items consider the implications of an integrated approach to assessment by integrating Assessment for, as and of Learning, and Assessment for and as Learning. The results of both studies show that an integrated approach has the most positive effect on learner performance in comparison to non-integrated approaches in the classroom, in terms of writing and listening comprehension skills.

Many benefits of implementing AfL are highlighted in the literature, and discussed in relation to the understanding of assessment rubrics and criteria, benefits of portfolio work, computer-based assessment and self-assessment,

learners' ownership of their work and the benefits of an integrated approach to assessment. However, the challenges of implementing AfL are also discussed, including practical issues such as lack of time, insufficient and varying teacher knowledge, learner engagement, differences between teachers' perceptions and practice, computer-based assessment challenges, and tensions between Assessment of Learning (AoL) and Assessment for Learning. Given these obstacles, many authors call for developments to AfL in terms of enhanced collaboration, training for practitioners to develop assessment literacy, ensuring learners' understanding of assessment and learners' active participation in AfL, a balance between AoL and AfL, and the aligning of learning, teaching and assessment.

## Areas for future consideration

Along with the conclusions, the study suggests several areas for future consideration.

- AfL is not a central term for assessment in the Curriculum for Wales. However, it could be useful to consider whether it would be beneficial to continue to make practitioners and settings in Wales aware of the term in the international literature. This could help towards ensuring that education policy and practice in Wales continue to be based on the most recent developments in research and evidence on AfL practice for language learning.
- An area of consideration could be to examine the availability of evidence that explores AfL to support learners' plurilingualism and cross-linguistic skills, and its applicability to the context of Wales. Such evidence could provide further guidance for practitioners to develop learners' plurilingualism and cross-linguistic skills.
- Another area of consideration could be to examine the availability of evidence that explores AfL to support lesser used languages, and its applicability to the context of Wales. Given the emphasis on Welsh language learner progression in the Curriculum for Wales and in the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy, such evidence could provide further guidance for practitioners to develop learners' Welsh language skills.

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- One area of consideration could be to examine the need for professional learning opportunities for teachers to develop AfL practice to celebrate and promote learners' plurilingualism, as well as other cross-linguistic skills.
- Sourcing further evidence on how language proficiency plays a role in the delivery of AfL tools and strategies is another area for consideration. This could provide further evidence on the type of assessment tools that are better suited for learners with different language proficiencies.
- It could be useful to consider to what extent learners are supported to develop appropriate awareness of assessment criteria, requirements and activities.
- Specific attention could also be given to student voice by taking into account learners' ideas about potential ways of assessing their own language learning.

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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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