Evaluating the effects of multilingual literacy learning in the bilingual context in Wales: a case study of practice

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Background Literature

Multilingualism: 'the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one 'variety of language" (Council of Europe 2014).

Multilingualism has a strong presence in a **policymaking context** in Wales. Welsh Government policies and initiatives advocate language learning e.g.:
❖ the *Global Futures* (Welsh Government 2015-20) initiative.
❖ the proposal for one million Welsh speakers by 2050.

What is the practice-based evidence for multilingualism in schools in Wales?

❖ As Hopwood indicates, only **20% of the population** have **access to both their official** "hawl-iaith" (2017, p. 79).
❖ Board and Tinsley highlight that 'while Estyn recommends at least **two hours per week** [for MFL at Key stage 3], schools only offer **one and a half hours** a week on average' (2017, p. 20).
❖ Educational curricula in countries such as **Luxembourg** stress that Wales is lagging behind other European nations.

There is **potential support** for a **multilingual literacy approach**:

❖ Scholars advocate the **interdependence of languages** (e.g. Lasagabaster 2017, p. 593).
❖ In the UK context, Wendy Ayres-Bennett calls for 'a **more holistic view** of languages and language policy' (2017, p. 233).

ETHICS

A disclaimer and consent form was sent to each adult participant. Adult participants were asked their permission to be either named in the report or to be anonymised. A disclaimer and consent form was sent to the Acting Head of MFL at the case study school regarding the Year 7 pupils who completed the anonymous questionnaire. Participants could withdraw their consent from the project at any time. The project was approved by Cardiff University School of Modern Languages ethics committee.

Methods

❖ **Qualitative** research methods were employed to gather the relevant evidence.

❖ The school used as a **case study** in this research, was an appropriate choice due to its Multilingual Literacy project in its pilot year in the 2017/18 academic year and its sociolinguistic background as a Welsh-medium secondary school in the bilingual Welsh-English context in Wales.
❖ Evidence was gathered from stakeholders including **Year 7 pupils** and **academic staff** in the case study school as well as educational **professionals**.

❖ Data collection was carried out using the following research methods:
1. **Semi-structured interviews** (by telephone / in person / sent electronically with a written response).
2. **Classroom observations** - one Year 7 English class, one Year 7 French class and one Year 9 Welsh class were observed, all undertaking the Multilingual Literacy project.
3. **Anonymous pupil questionnaire** - responses from a cohort of 63 Year 7 pupils with 49% being girls and 51% being boys.

Results

Findings are as follows:
❖ Classroom observations in the school revealed **the interdependence of languages** as a learning tool.
❖ In the pupil questionnaire, **51%** of pupils stated that their **favourite language** is exclusively **English** in comparison to **32% for Welsh** and **5% for French**.
❖ **30% of pupils** noted that they are **not fluent in Welsh** in comparison to **6% in English**.
❖ Semi-structured interviews indicated that **teachers' lack of confidence** was preventing them from using their L2 and L3 in the school.

Discussion

❖ This Multilingual Literacy project, in highlighting the **interdependence of languages** can be linked to Cenoz's concept of "connected growers" (2013, p. 81) where individuals **apply the skills** that they have developed in L1 to L2 and / or L3.

❖ There is a need to foster pupils' understanding of their **linguistic identity** and to **defamiliarise English** as the sole mode of communication. There is scope for a **plurilingual approach** to language learning in Wales: removing 'the ideal of the native speaker as the ultimate achievement and [replacing] it with the aim of an effective pluralistic communicator who draws on his / her varied repertoire of linguistic and cultural knowledge' (Council of Europe 2001, cited in Mehmedbegovic 2017, p. 112).

❖ Teachers' lack of confidence at the school illustrates that the **linguistic self-perception of all teachers** needs to change for language learning to be incorporated across the curriculum. Therefore, **training** for teachers will be crucial.

❖ The Multilingual Literacy project at the case study school lacked a sound '**community of practice**' (e.g. Wenger 1998) - 'learning as social participation' (Wenger 1998, p. 4). There was **little evidence of an informal learning** environment outside the classroom.

Conclusions

Key findings:
❖ Multilingual literacy learning **supports literacy** across languages by improving pupils' **critical thinking skills** and **confidence**.
❖ Multilingual literacy learning has the potential to affect pupils' **linguistic identity**.
❖ **Challenges facing teachers** with regard to multilingual literacy learning.

Recommendation for policy and practice:
❖ The concept of '**Plurilingual Literacy'** learning could better fit the Multilingual Literacy project.
❖ The notion of '**language teachers'** (Kelly 2015, p. 78) needs to be implemented for three languages (or two) to be taught by the same teacher.
❖ A sound '**community of practice'** (e.g. Wenger 1998) needs to be developed. This includes informal environments to use and practise languages.

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