

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Policy Review of Welsh Language in Education

Visits to secondary schools in Anglesey and Gwynedd, February 20th - February 22nd 2002

Introduction

This paper notes the main features of visits to four secondary schools in Anglesey and Gwynedd which took place between February 20th and February 22nd 2002. The visits were arranged and carried out by Catrin Redknap, following approval by the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee Clerk, National Assembly for Wales.

Purpose of the visits

The purpose of the visits was to expand on the evidence-gathering which the ELL Committee had undertaken at its meeting in Machynlleth at the end of January, in the context of the Policy Review of the Welsh Language in Education. Evidence presented at that meeting had involved the views of secondary school pupils and their attitudes towards their experience of Welsh in education. Four schools in Anglesey and Gwynedd were approached, with the aim of extending this aspect of the current Policy Review, both geographically and also in terms of the nature of the Welsh language provision offered to pupils.

Aim of this paper

This paper seeks to record the main findings of these meetings with pupils. Specific references to individual schools are avoided; the aim, rather, is to provide a summary of the most salient features of the evidence gathered.

Preliminary arrangements

The Directors of Education of Anglesey and Gwynedd were contacted and approval was sought for the proposed visits. Both gave their ready and full support. The Headteachers or representatives of four schools were then approached and arrangements were made for the visits. The four schools visited were:

Holyhead Secondary School, Anglesey

Ysgol Uwchradd Bodedern, Anglesey

Friars Secondary School, Bangor, Gwynedd

Ysgol Tryfan, Bangor, Gwynedd

Information provided for the schools

It was explained to Headteachers and their representatives that the purpose of the meetings with pupils was to explore their views and attitudes in relation to their experience of Welsh at school. This also involved discussing some aspects of pupils' linguistic behaviour outside school. It was pointed out to them that the aim was not to evaluate specific teaching methods; pupils were assured that the intention was not to evaluate individual levels of linguistic competence, and they were reminded that comments about individual teachers were not being sought.

Meetings with the pupils

Pupils were selected by staff in advance of the visits. All meetings with pupils took place during normal school hours, and lasted between twenty and forty minutes. A total of seven groups were seen. Groups consisted of between 3 and 10 pupils, representing Years 7 to 11. In all cases pupils responded in a co-operative and open manner, and showed great readiness to make constructive observations.

The composition of each group determined to a large extent the precise nature of the sessions, and factors such as age and ability influenced the degree to which pupils' observations had to be prompted by questioning. Sessions were held both in Welsh and in English, according to pupils' particular circumstances.

Nature of the Welsh provision received by the pupils

The schools represented significant variation in terms of linguistic provision, and similarly the pupils represented a broad spectrum in terms of their contact with Welsh, ranging from those learning Welsh solely as a subject (second language) to those taking most of their subjects through the medium of Welsh. Between these two poles several variations existed.

Main areas covered in the sessions

The nature of each session varied to some extent according to the characteristics and responses of individual pupils. However, the discussions were structured along the following guidelines:

1. Brief explanation of school background (year; primary school attended)
2. Linguistic background (patterns of language use at home and in social networks)
3. Degree and nature of contact with Welsh at school (Welsh as a subject - first and second language; Welsh as a medium; extra-curricular activities)
4. Awareness/ self-evaluation of competence in Welsh
5. Attitudes towards their experience of Welsh at school (evaluation of different aspects of their learning - positive and negative; any factors that have caused them to change their attitudes?)
6. Looking towards the future: uses and significance of Welsh in terms of their career and future lives

OBSERVATIONS

1. Pupils' perceptions of their linguistic competence in Welsh

Almost all pupils, and particularly the older ones, revealed a keen **awareness** of their degree

of competence in Welsh. These self-perceptions would appear to correlate closely with pupils' degree of **usage** of the language.

(i) *Evaluation of progress in Welsh since Year 6*

When asked to reflect on whether their Welsh had improved since Year 6, all pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 indicated that they now felt more competent in the language.

When the same question was put to the older pupils, a number of responses were put forward:

- Some pupils felt that their competence in Welsh had improved, and that they had more opportunity to use the language also.
- Other pupils believed that their competence in Welsh (particularly written Welsh) had improved, although usage had declined. When asked to elaborate, many pupils noted that English-speaking peers were now exerting more influence on them.
- Others felt that their Welsh had deteriorated since Year 6. The two main reasons quoted were the influence of English-speaking peers, and a lack of opportunity to practise their spoken Welsh in class.

(ii) *Linguistic insecurity*

One revealing feature of pupils' awareness of their competence in Welsh was the feeling of inadequacy expressed by some when comparing themselves with speakers they considered to be 'good' or 'fluent'. Some of these comments included references to the perceived inadequacy of the Welsh spoken in their family/ community. Others made comparisons between their attempts to speak Welsh and the Welsh spoken by their grandparents, whom they believed to be more competent in the language. There were some suggestions that it was difficult for pupils anxious to practise and improve their Welsh to integrate with more fluent speakers, although it was recognised that low levels of confidence rather than any other form of reluctance accounted for this.

Not surprisingly, there appeared to be a close correlation between self-esteem with regards to competence, on the one hand, and consistency of usage on the other. It was also noted, however, that amongst those who were most aware of their limitations in Welsh, the vast majority indicated that they would like to be able to improve their skills in Welsh.

2. Welsh taught as a subject

A number of pupils welcomed the fact that learning the language at KS3 had enabled them to improve their command of the language. Whilst some referred to more formal aspects of the written language, the majority of these pupils were most enthusiastic about the creative use of the language (e.g. theme work, script-writing, role-play). Amongst those who were less happy about their progress since Year 6, some indicated that they would welcome further opportunities to improve their oral competence.

3. Welsh as a medium for other subjects

No particular references were made to linguistic difficulties relating to studying subjects through the medium of Welsh, with the exception of the need to familiarise themselves with some initially unfamiliar terms. What was mentioned, however, was the disparity in terms of the resources available in the two languages (websites and revision materials were mentioned).

4. Use of Welsh outside the school - family and social networks

Significant variations were noted, with pupils' linguistic behaviour ranging from consistent use of Welsh with family and most friends to little or no Welsh outside school. Several general tendencies emerged:

- Amongst those pupils who spoke Welsh consistently to their parents, a significant proportion noted that their use of Welsh with friends was less consistent.
- A very small minority noted that whilst they spoke Welsh to one or both parents they spoke to their siblings in English.
- Some pupils observed that the social activities which they pursued afforded limited opportunities to use their Welsh. One or two suggested that there was a certain stigma attached to speaking Welsh in some circles - it was not considered 'cool'.
- Others, however, referred to the valuable opportunities provided via the school to extend their use of Welsh to extra-curricular activities.
- Others clearly viewed Welsh as a central part of their socio-cultural experiences, and listed as exceptions the activities/events outside school where they did **not** speak Welsh.

5. Perceived value and usefulness of Welsh in the future

When asked about how useful Welsh was likely to be for them once they had completed their schooling, pupils offered a number of responses:

- Some noted that they were aware of the potential benefits of possessing good bilingual skills when planning their career.
- Others indicated that, even if their future careers did not directly require competence in Welsh, the importance of Welsh as an integral part of their identity meant that they would continue to use the language.
- Some pupils indicated that Welsh would be useful for some occupations (e.g. nursing) if they chose to remain in their local area.
- Others, however, expressed doubts over whether they would in reality use Welsh in the workplace. Of these, some believed that they would continue to use the language only with the family, whilst others foresaw that their contact with Welsh would be minimal once they had left school.

Concluding remarks

The four schools represented significant variation in terms of the nature of the Welsh language provision offered to pupils. Consequently there are clear limitations to the general conclusions which can be drawn from an impressionistic evaluation such as the one outlined above. Furthermore, many of the views volunteered by the pupils reflected not only the nature of the provision offered by the schools but also a whole array of socio-cultural factors and personal circumstances.

Despite these limitations, however, a number of important issues were introduced:

- Varying levels of achievement and expectations in Welsh at KS2 resulting in significant variation in terms of the transition to KS3 (challenge of ensuring that progression along a linguistic continuum is appropriate for all pupils)
- Challenge of maintaining appropriate rates of progression along the continuum as pupils move to KS4
- Impact of the overall linguistic ethos of the school on linguistic behaviour and attitudes
- The extent of the influence of fellow pupils on individual linguistic behaviour

- The degree to which pupils' readiness to use the language can be influenced by perceptions of competence
- The influence of informal social networks (including the family and immediate neighbourhood) on pupils' linguistic competence and use:
 - (i) how this behaviour conditions attitudes towards the language at school
 - (ii) the **relative** significance of pupils' contact with Welsh in and outside school to wider considerations of linguistic vitality

Acknowledgements

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