

*Towards the language continuum:  
Definitions and implications for Welsh learners in  
English-medium education*

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the *Curriculum for Wales* fast approaching, it is timely to discuss one of the key developments in relation to the Welsh language in the new curriculum, the language continuum. Although “continuum” is a term that has often been used by academics (see e.g. Baker and Jones, 2000) and policy makers (see e.g. WG, 2017a) alike, the term has several interpretations, not only in the literature on bilingualism and bilingual education, but also in Welsh policy regarding language and education. The purpose of this paper is to review the main interpretations of the language continuum, before proposing an alternative interpretation, what the author calls the “continuum of multi-competence”, which aims to bridge between the theoretical and the practical, linking the concept of a language continuum to the concept of a learning continuum, as recognised in the new curriculum. The implications of introducing the continuum for Welsh language in English-medium schools in particular will be discussed.

**Key words:** Welsh, second language (L2), language continuum, bilingualism continuum, multi-competence approach, continuum of multi-competence, flexible bilingualism, Curriculum for Wales, bilingual education.

*Introduction*

There now appears to be a consensus that teaching Welsh merely as a subject, with minimal contact hours with the language, is not generally an effective way of introducing the language to second language learners (W. G. Lewis, 2010b, para. 1). Although there has been an increase in Welsh Second Language (WSL) standards in recent years, this improvement, particularly at Key Stage 3, appears to have started ‘from a low base’ (Estyn, 2015, p. 51). And while there are examples of excellence in teaching Welsh in secondary schools across Wales, as Estyn (2019, p. 39) notes, ‘the majority of pupils do not achieve in line with their abilities by the time they reach the end of compulsory schooling.’

A particular issue faced by English-medium secondary schools in recent years has been ensuring that pupils gain an appropriate qualification in Welsh. In 2013, for example, only 27% of pupils sat the Full Course, with 35% taking the Short Course. Considering that 15% of all pupils sat exams in Welsh First Language, this means that almost a quarter of pupils did not sit a Welsh exam that year (Estyn, 2014, p. 43). Although there was a slight increase in the number of pupils registering for the Full Course (Estyn, 2018, p. 81), that is, in the years leading up to the removal of the Short Course, Estyn (2018, p. 38) noted that the Short Course qualification was the Welsh qualification attained by most secondary pupils between 2010 and 2016.

Another ongoing issue in the WSL class, apparently, is the lack of motivation among second language learners to study Welsh as a subject. According to recent data from a longitudinal study by WISERD, the majority of learners surveyed believe there is too much onus on passing exams (Rhys and Smith, 2022). Many learners reported their dissatisfaction that there is not enough focus on developing communication skills for the world beyond school. The authors go on to suggest that there is a causal link between the increased emphasis on preparing learners for exams as they approach GCSE, and an increase in negative attitudes towards the Welsh language.

The same is true where learning and teaching Welsh as a second language in primary schools is concerned. While most pupils make good progress in developing their ability to speak Welsh in the foundation phase, that progress appears to slow as they progress to Key Stage 2 (Estyn, 2019, p. 26). The use of Welsh within and beyond the classroom is often very limited (Estyn, 2019), and that is because a significant proportion of teachers in this sector are not sufficiently competent to teach Welsh

effectively (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2020; Roberts, 2010) nor are they confident enough to use the language beyond the Welsh lessons themselves (e.g. Estyn, 2015, 2016, 2020). The lack of competence and confidence in delivering Welsh as a second language as a subject is, in all likelihood, largely due to a lack of training in the methodology of teaching Welsh as a second language (Donaldson, 2015). Standards in Welsh, particularly at Key Stage 2, have been a concern for some years now (Estyn, 2019, p. 26).

The consensus on WSL standards was reinforced in the *One Language For All* review (Davies, 2013), and again in Donaldson's (2015) review of the national curriculum, *Successful Futures*. The *One Language for All* review (Davies, 2013, p. 1) noted the seriousness of the situation, and went as far as stating it was 'the eleventh hour for Welsh second language.' The need for a fundamental change in Welsh language provision was emphasised, not only to improve standards in the subject, but also for learners' enjoyment of the subject. The report states:

According to the evidence, this is a very tedious experience for large numbers of them – they do not regard the subject as being relevant or of any value to them. They are not confident enough to use Welsh outside the classroom – the opportunities to do so are actually very limited – and there is no incentive therefore to learn the language. (Davies, 2013, p. 1)

The Davies review (2013) and its findings would lay an important foundation stone for Donaldson's review (2015) and his recommendations on the place of Welsh in the new curriculum. In response to the Davies review's recommendations, ten recommendations relating to Welsh in the curriculum were put forward in the curriculum review. As well as the Welsh language remaining compulsory up to the age of 16, the review recommended that there should be 'a renewed focus in schools on learning Welsh primarily as a means of communication, particularly oral communication and understanding' (Donaldson, 2015, p. 60). Particular mention was made of developing learners' transactional competence in the Welsh language, as they progress along the learning continuum throughout their education. Although it does not go on to clearly define what constitutes transactional competence in this regard, the concept is probably related to the review's recommendation to place a new emphasis on the use of the language for communication functions in the workplace (Tavakoli and Jones, 2018). As Donaldson (2015, p. 60) notes, 'there is a need to build children and young

people's confidence to use the language not only in lessons but also in activities and real-life situations outside the classroom and outside school.'

*The Welsh Language in the Curriculum for Wales*

Drawing on Professor Donaldson's findings in *Successful Futures* (2015), draft guidance for the new curriculum was published by WG in 2019. In these draft documents, the first details on the structure and elements of the new curriculum were presented. Starting in September 2022, the new curriculum will be rolled out to all school years in primary schools and Year 7 (ages 11-12) in secondary schools.<sup>1</sup> It will then be rolled out by school year until it is delivered to Year 11 learners in 2026. In terms of structure, the new curriculum will be organised around six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE), with Welsh, English and international languages coming under Languages, Literacy and Communication. It is also noted that the new curriculum will abolish the previous Key Stages, replaced by a learning continuum for the four AoLEs, each with a series of Progression Steps to measure learners as they move along this learning continuum.

The launch of the new Curriculum for Wales from September 2022 is arguably a very important milestone that offers an opportunity to take a fresh look at the way languages are taught, including Welsh in English-medium schools (Rhys and Smith, 2022), to improve Welsh standards among these learners. This ambition is clearly evident in the new curriculum guidance, which states that one of the main features of the four purposes of the new curriculum is to develop 'ambitious, capable learners who can communicate effectively in different forms and settings, using both Welsh and English' (WG, 2020a, p. 24).

More specifically, it is noted that all schools are now required to develop literacy in Welsh and English and to integrate Welsh across all subjects in the new curriculum. As WG (2019a, p. 13) emphasises:

1 Recognising the challenges that secondary schools in particular face in delivering the curriculum in light of the coronavirus pandemic, WG (2021, July 6th) confirmed that the secondary sector would either be able to continue with their plans to introduce the new curriculum to Year 7 from 2022 onwards as planned, or postpone for a year and introduce the new curriculum to both Years 7 and 8 from 2023.

‘Settings and schools should support the development of learners’ Welsh-language skills across the whole curriculum.’ It is therefore now recognised that Welsh is not just a subject and that all teachers have a responsibility for developing pupils’ language skills in both Welsh and English across the whole curriculum. In addition to this, WG (2017a, p. 38) has also accepted Davies’ (2013) recommendation to develop ‘a single continuum for the teaching of Welsh as a language, with an emphasis on learning Welsh predominantly as a means of communication, particularly oral communication’, as part of the learning and assessment arrangements of the new curriculum.

The need for change in the way Welsh is delivered in the new curriculum becomes all the more apparent given that education is a key theme in WG’s current strategy (2017a) for the Welsh language, and its ambitious target of reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Given that 68% of primary schools and 76% of secondary schools in Wales are English-medium (StatsWales, 2021), it is clear that the education system, and the English-medium sector in particular, will play a central role in creating new Welsh speakers (Beard, 2020). This is recognised in *Cymraeg 2050*, where an ambitious target is set for this sector: ‘at least half of those learners report by 2050 that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school.’ (WG, 2017a, p. 38).

### *The “Welsh” continuum”?*

As previously stated, the intention now is for schools to introduce a single Welsh language learning continuum to all learners. Although “continuum” is a term that has been used by academics (see e.g. Baker and Jones, 2000) and policy makers (see e.g. WG, 2017a) alike, there is no consistency in the literature regarding its definition. And while it is now clear that what is meant by “continuum” in the context of the new curriculum is a framework of progression, this is a term that continues to be interpreted in different ways.

By reviewing the main theoretical interpretations of the concept of a “language continuum” found in the literature on bilingualism and second language acquisition, together with some interpretations in Welsh policy on language and education, the aim is to shed light on the different possible meanings of this ambiguous term, before proposing an alternative

interpretation of a continuum based on a multi-competence approach<sup>2</sup> (see e.g. Cook, 1992, 1996, 2006, 2016), or what is known as a holistic view of bilingualism (see e.g. Grosjean, 1985, 1989, 2001, 2008).<sup>3</sup> The intention of this original interpretation of continuum is to attempt to bridge the theoretical interpretations of the language continuum and the concept of a learning continuum as interpreted in the context of the new Curriculum for Wales, creating a foundation for a pedagogical framework intended for language teachers and learners alike.

### *Interpreting the continuum*

At first glance, it seems possible to define a “continuum” as one line with two dichotomous ends. When applying this definition to the context of learning two languages, individuals who do not have sufficient proficiency in their two languages would be located at one extreme, and individuals with balanced bilingual skills in both languages at the other extreme. This is what is known as the skill continuum (Thomas and Webb-Davies, 2017, p. 20). However, as Thomas and Webb-Davies caution, such a definition may oversimplify the concept of bilingualism, suggesting that there are certain limitations to the language learning process. It can therefore be

- 2 Cook (2016, p. 2) defines “multi-competence” as ‘the knowledge and use of two or more languages by the same individual or the same community’, with all the speaker’s languages forming ‘one overall system, with complex and shifting relationships between them, affecting the first language as well as the others.’ For the purposes of this paper, “multi-competence” is specifically interpreted at the level of the individual. That is, the bilingual speaker’s entire linguistic repertoire.
- 3 According to this perspective, the linguistic skills of the bilingual speaker in both languages are considered as being part of one linguistic repertoire. This linguistic repertoire is unique to the individual and it is therefore not possible to separate the two languages and compare them to the norms of the monolingual speaker, as in the fractional/monolingual perspective on bilingualism. Grosjean (2008, p. 13) encapsulates this, noting that the bilingual speaker is not ‘the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals’, but rather a speaker with a ‘unique and specific linguistic configuration’.

argued that this simple interpretation of the continuum supports a fractional/monolingual view of bilingualism.<sup>4</sup>

### *Bilingualism continuum*

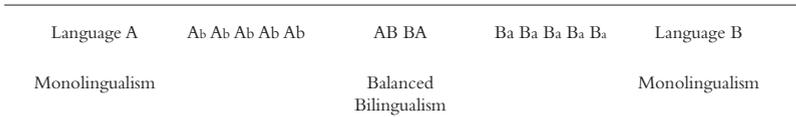
However, academics such as Hornberger (2003) maintain that a “continuum” is a range of minor points between two ends, and that these points have more in common than differences. According to Hornberger (2003, p. xiv), a “continuum” is best viewed as an endless, infinite line, with a number of unstable minor changes.

Hornberger’s interpretation aligns with Grosjean’s (1985, 1989, 2001, 2008) holistic view of individual bilingualism; a view supported by a number of other leading academics in the field (e.g. Baker, 2011; Cenoz and Gorter, 2011; Cook, 1991; Hoffman, 1991; Goh and Burns, 2012; Garcia, 2009; Romaine, 1995). Using Hornberger’s (2003) interpretation of the term “continuum”, the “bilingualism continuum” at the level of the individual could be considered as the lifelong process of learning languages. At one end of the continuum, there are new learners to the language, and at the other, there are proficient speakers in two or more languages. However, as Hornberger’s interpretation suggests, there are no particular limitations to this process of language learning and therefore this perspective concedes that an individual’s bilingualism can change over time, moving back and forth on this continuum, depending on the individual’s unique experience (Thomas and Webb-Davies, 2017, p. 2).

Valdés (2003) has proposed an alternative interpretation of what she calls the “bilingualism continuum” focusing on the speaker’s proficiency in more than one language. According to Valdés, monolingualism in one language is located at one extreme and monolingualism in another language at the other extreme. Between these two extremes are speakers who are bilingual in either language to varying degrees, with the concept of “balanced bilingualism” in the middle:

It could be argued, first of all, that this interpretation of “continuum” is a misleading one, given that there is no constant progress between two

4 This perspective seeks to compare the linguistic norms of the speaker in their second language with the typical linguistic norms of a monolingual speaker in that language. This perspective considers the bilingual speaker as ‘two monolinguals in one person’ (Baker, 2011, p. 9) and their proficiency in both languages must be balanced.



**Figure 1. Bilingualism continuum (adapted from the work of Valdés, 2003, p. 36 discussed in Baker, 2011, p. 8)**

distinct poles. That is, it could be argued that “balanced bilingualism” at the centre of the diagram should be one of the poles of this continuum, with speakers making progress between monolingualism towards bilingualism. But this is probably an effort by Valdés to try to combine and reflect two related continua within a single diagram. That is, in the same way that a speaker can progress between monolingualism in one language (Language A) and balanced bilingualism, they can also slip back from balanced bilingualism to monolingualism in the other language (Language B), as well as to monolingualism in the first language (Language A), if both languages aren’t used and maintained over time.

Using Valdés’ interpretation, one could consider, at least theoretically, monolingual English speakers as being at one end of the continuum (Language A), and monolingual Welsh speakers as being at the other (Language B). Between the two ends of the continuum, we can identify first-language English speakers who can speak Welsh as a second language at different levels (Ab – Ab), balanced bilingual speakers of English-Welsh (AB) and Welsh-English (BA), and first-language Welsh speakers who can speak English as a second language at different levels (Ba – Ba). However, due to the presence and status of English as a majority language in Wales and beyond, there are very few who can now be considered monolingual speakers of Welsh. As the results of 20th century censuses show, there has been a substantial drop in the number of monolingual Welsh people during this period as a result of various sociolinguistic changes (for further discussion, see, e.g. Aitchison and Carter, 2000). By the 1950s, monolingual Welsh adults were as rare as gold sovereigns (Jenkins and Williams, 2000, pp. 12–13); so rare that the census stopped collecting information on the number of monolingual Welsh speakers from 1991 (WG, 2022d). Given the state of bilingualism in Wales, one can see how, theoretically, a monolingual Welsh speaker could become a monolingual English speaker over time, as the speaker loses touch with Welsh as a living language in the community. It is unlikely, however, that a monolingual English speaker would become a monolingual Welsh speaker, even if the speaker lived in a

predominantly Welsh-speaking area. This interpretation of the continuum, therefore, does not take into account the reality of bilingualism in action or the interplay between the individual's bilingualism and the community's bilingualism.

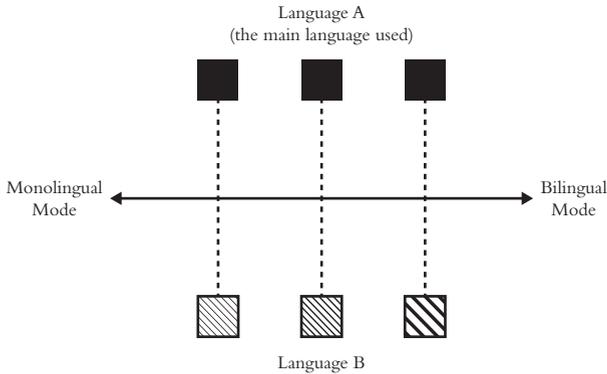
It is also noted that there are very few who have wholly balanced skills in both languages. Several scholars (e.g. Baker 2011; Fishman, 1970; Hoffman 1991, Romaine 1995) have even criticised the concept of balanced bilingualism, noting that it is only an ideal concept because bilingual speakers, more often than not, use their two languages for different functions and domains, and therefore bilingual speakers have varying levels of fluency in their two languages.

While the Valdés continuum is useful in considering how proficiency in either language can develop throughout the life of the bilingual individual, it is not sufficient to measure the proficiency of multilingual speakers who can speak three or more languages. The interpretation also does not address the speaker's use of languages, and according to Baker (2011, p. 8), it would be better 'to move away from the multi-colored canvas of proficiency levels to a portrait of the everyday use of the two languages by individuals.'

Grosjean (1985, 1989, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2008) also interprets the bilingualism continuum at the level of the individual. Unlike Valdés (2003), however, Grosjean focuses on bilingual speakers' functional use of their languages. According to Grosjean's Language Mode Theory, there are two poles, or two "language modes" as he puts it, namely the "monolingual mode" and the "bilingual mode". The figure below shows how Grosjean (1998, 2001, 2008) visualises such a continuum.

For example, when the bilingual speaker speaks to a monolingual individual, using only one of their languages (Language A), the bilingual speaker can be described as being in monolingual mode. Although the bilingual speaker in this context only uses Language A, the speaker's Language B is still used, albeit to a much lesser extent.<sup>5</sup> When the bilingual speaker speaks to someone who is bilingual in the same two languages, and combines the two languages within the same conversation fairly evenly, the speaker can be described as being in bilingual mode. Although the bilingual speaker makes

5 Grosjean (2008) argues that the interferences that occur as the bilingual speaker retrieves words from either language proves that both languages are active all the time, even in almost monolingual contexts. However, he admits that there is not yet enough empirical evidence to demonstrate the extent to which both languages are active in particular contexts.



**Figure 2. Bilingualism continuum (adapted from the work of Grosjean 1998, 2001, 2008). The squares in the figure show the extent to which both languages are used according to Language Mode Theory.**

use of both languages when speaking, language A is seen to be dominant and that is, according to Grosjean, because it is the base language in this context. Depending on the context, the person the bilingual speaker is speaking to, and the topic of discussion in question, the bilingual speaker may move back and forth between the two poles of this continuum throughout the day (Grosjean, 2010, p. 42). As the bilingual speaker shifts between these two language modes, the bilingual speaker's Language B is used to varying degrees. When the main language used in the conversation (Language A) changes to the other language (Language B), the two languages change places on the continuum, with the original language of the conversation used to a lesser extent.

It should also be noted that Grosjean's interpretation of a continuum can be applied to the other main language skills of writing, listening and reading. Nonetheless, Grosjean (2008, p. 63) admits that it is difficult to apply this interpretation of a bilingual continuum to describe language dominant bilinguals, such as Welsh learners in English-medium schools, as they are unlikely to make functional use of their second language beyond the classroom. It could also be argued that this definition, like Valdés's definition, is inadequate to convey the experience of a multilingual speaker who speaks more than two languages.

Cook (2016) also acknowledges that "second language speaker" is a problematic term. According to Cook (2016, p. 4), it is possible to

distinguish between two types of second language speakers, namely “second language learners” who learn a second language (mostly in an educational context) but do not use it beyond the classroom, and “second language users” who go a step further to make use of the second language beyond the classroom. To exemplify these definitions in the context of the acquisition of Welsh, those who only study Welsh as a second language in English-medium schools, but do not use it beyond school, could be described as WSL learners. Conversely, any WSL learner who goes on to use the language purposefully beyond the classroom, that is, in the wider community, could be described as a second language user. Given Cook’s (2016) definitions of second language users, it is highly likely that most of those studying Welsh in English-medium schools or streams are “second language learners”, and for the most part, there are few opportunities for such speakers to use the language in authentic contexts outside the classroom (see e.g. Lovell, 2018).

The above discussion highlights one of the main weaknesses of the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy (WG, 2017a), and its associated action plans (see e.g., WG, 2021b), which is the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a “Welsh speaker”, particularly in relation to education (Lovell, 2018). The strategy includes an ambitious target of ensuring that ‘70 per cent of all learners develop their Welsh language skills and are able to use the language with confidence in all aspects of their lives by the time they leave school’ by 2050 (WG, 2017a, p. 38). With regard to the English-medium sector in particular, WG (ibid.) notes that at least half of those learners will need to report by 2050 that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school in order to achieve the target of a million speakers.

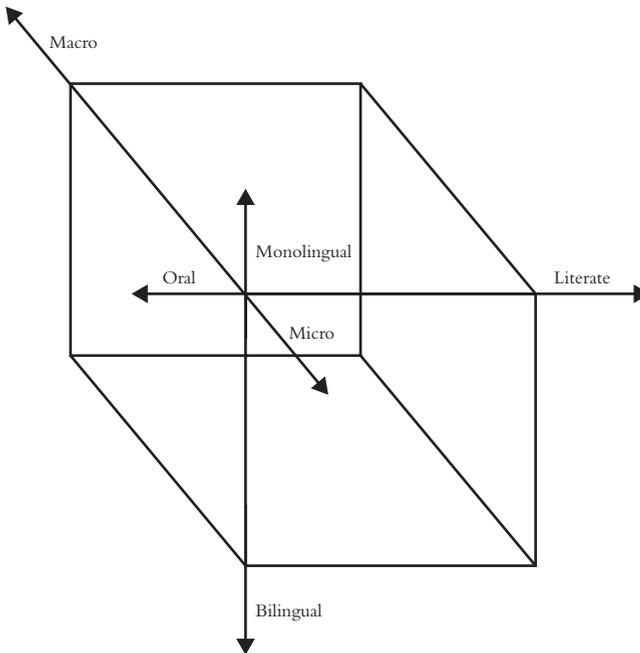
To the same end as Grosjean, Hornberger (1989, 2003) also proposes an interpretation of the continuum which focuses on the speaker’s use of two or more languages. In her work on continua development, Hornberger (1989, 2003) identifies the “monolingualism-bilingualism continuum” as one of three continua she proposes for defining contexts of literacy development in more than one language. As Hornberger acknowledges, it is possible to consider this continuum at a macro level, which is the use and function of languages in a bilingual community, as well as at a micro level, which is bilingual individuals’ use of their languages.

The figure below shows how Hornberger imagines the monolingualism-bilingualism continuum. Hornberger goes a step further than others, by considering how bilingualism, on an individual and societal level, is intertwined with literacy in two languages. Hornberger notes that there is a

close relationship between these different continua and as such, each continuum should be taken into account when describing a specific context for literacy development in both languages.

In discussing different theoretical frameworks for bilingual education, García (2009, p. 118) also refers to the concept of a “bilingual continuum” in relation to learning and using two or more languages. García (2009) stresses that bilingualism is not a stable state, whether at an individual or societal level. As well as recognising that bilingual individuals move along a continuum, she suggests that the language community can move along a continuum. She says:

The comings and goings of bilingual use and proficiency are recognized by schools, as different children, families and communities find themselves at various



**Figure 3. A monolingualism-bilingualism continuum (adapted from Hornberger’s 2003 work), which is one of three continua she proposes to describe literacy contexts in both languages.**

points on a bilingual continuum depending on life circumstances, and as they interact with other speech communities. (García, 2009, p. 118).

García's interpretation of the term "continuum" suggests that bilingual communities, as well as their bilingual inhabitants, are on a metaphorical linguistic journey as they move back and forth between the two ends of the continuum, namely monolingualism and bi/multilingualism.

The above quote also highlights that bilingual speakers make strategic use of their languages for different functions within the language community, and that these language practices keep changing, depending on the communicative needs of the speaker at the time (Herdina and Jessner, 2002, p. 74). According to García (2009), learners' multilingual practices must be recognised and capitalised on by encouraging them in the classroom to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire. She and other academics, such as Cenoz and Gorter (2011; 2015), argue that a policy of "dynamic bilingualism", or what Blackledge and Creese (2010) call "flexible bilingualism", empowers teachers to implement a holistic approach (Grosjean, 1985, 1989, 2001, 2008) and to plan for the use of two (or more) languages in the classroom as appropriate. This policy contrasts with the policy seen in place in designated Welsh-medium schools, for example, where the use of English as a medium of learning and instruction in the classroom is deliberately prohibited to create a safe space for the Welsh, as a minority language, to be protected and developed.<sup>6</sup> This is known as a policy of "separate bilingualism" (Blackledge and Creese, 2010).

In relation to bilingual education in Wales, Selleck (2013) has questioned whether a policy of "flexible bilingualism" would be better suited to the sociolinguistic context that now exists in the country. According to Selleck (2013, p. 38), consideration should be given to whether a more flexible language policy would be better suited to educating pupils from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds who have little contact with the Welsh language beyond school.

#### *The Welsh language continuum and the learning continuum*

WG (2017a, p. 38) confirmed in its *Cymraeg 2050* strategy that a single continuum for learning, teaching and assessing Welsh would be developed as part of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements for

6 A school with '100% of learners undertaking at least 90% of their school activities (curricular and extra-curricular) in Welsh' (WG 2021a, p. 17).

Wales, and that it would have a focus on the Welsh language ‘as a means of communication, particularly oral communication’. In its action plan for Welsh in education, WG (2017b, p. 10) goes on to explain that ‘this continuum will provide the basis for teaching and learning Welsh and other languages in the future.’ It also stated that all schools, regardless of the language medium of education within the school, will be ‘required to introduce the language continuum to all learners over time, and embed the acquisition of Welsh language skills across the curriculum’ (WG, 2017a, p. 38).

But the “language continuum” is not a new concept. In the policy review of the Welsh language, *Our Language: Its Future* (2002: 113), there was a call for ‘thorough research... into the feasibility of measuring pupils’ competence in Welsh along a linguistic continuum.’ The concept of a language continuum was also advocated by academics such as Baker and Jones (2000). To the same end as García (2009) and Selleck (2013), they call on Welsh schools to move away from a policy of separate bilingualism, towards a policy of dynamic bilingualism, where both languages are presented holistically (Baker and Jones, 2000, p. 135).

The concept of the “language continuum” is also explored in the *One Language for All* report. Davies (2013) recommends developing a single continuum of learning, teaching and assessment for the Welsh language. The advantage of one continuum, says Davies (2014, p. 26), is that ‘all pupils in Wales would follow the same programme of study and could be assessed against one framework.’

It has been confirmed in the draft guidance for the new curriculum (WG, 2020a) that one continuum of learning and teaching for the Welsh language and other languages will be introduced as part of the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience. The guidance outlines four Statements of What Matters in the AoLE, with five progression steps and a list of specific achievement outcomes for each statement.<sup>7,8</sup> The purpose of the Progression Steps, which roughly

7 The four statements of what matters are: (i) languages connect us; (ii) understanding languages is key to understanding the world around us; (iii) expressing ourselves through languages is key to communication; (iv) literature fires imagination and inspires creativity.

8 These achievement outcomes have a series of “I can” statements.” For example, under Progression Step 5: Understanding languages is key to understanding the world around us: ‘I can understand and evaluate what I hear and read in different contexts across a wide range of language’ (WG, 2020a, p. 134)

correspond to the previous Key Stages, is to introduce ‘a continuum or framework of progression in languages, starting with little or no language and working towards proficiency’ (WG, 2020a, p. 129). As learners complete achievement outcomes, they move along the progression steps, or learning continuum, towards proficiency in Welsh, English and international languages.

Reinforcing the views of academics such as García (2009, 2010), Hornberger (2003), and Thomas and Webb-Davies (2017), the new curriculum recognises that language learning and use is not a linear process and that each learner’s linguistic journey is unique. To quote the guidance:

It is essential, for example, to recognise that second language learners may use formulaic language with few mistakes initially and as they progress, when being more ambitious and spontaneous in their use of language, they may appear to make more mistakes. (WG, 2020a, p. 130)

We note from the guidance that, the concept of a continuum is now applied to all elements of learning in the new curriculum, with progress in each AoLE measured along what is known as the “learning continuum.” A single learning continuum for learners aged 3 to 16 will be introduced in the new curriculum, replacing the Key Stages of the current curriculum. It now appears that the language continuum is an extension of the learning continuum, rather than a separate, unique concept. As previously noted, there is now a reference in the guidance (WG, 2020a) and the strategy for the Welsh language in education (WG, 2017b) to the intention to extend the concept of a continuum to include other languages in due course. All of this suggests that this continuum will ultimately be a learning, teaching and assessment framework for all languages in the curriculum, rather than a specific continuum for the Welsh language.

The guidance attempts to outline in detail the key expected achievement outcomes for languages in English-medium and Welsh-medium settings. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the artificial distinction between “first language” and “second language” Welsh, previously referred to by former First Minister Carwyn Jones (2015, p. 1), will still remain to a degree in the new curriculum guidance, despite confirmation from WG (2019c) that the term “Welsh second language” would be removed. While the guidance avoids the use of the terms “first language” and “second language”, the references to the Welsh-medium and English-medium

sectors highlight that there is still a long way to go in terms of bridging the learning outcomes of the two sectors in future.

It can also be argued that the learning continuum, as outlined in the new curriculum, is rather complex. If the continuum is to be useful in tracking and assessing learners' linguistic progress, it will be crucial to consider how to present these detailed achievement outcomes in a way that allows teachers and learners alike to engage with the continuum in a meaningful fashion.

### *Schools' linguistic continuum*

Before concluding this discussion, there is one final interpretation of the continuum, the "schools' linguistic continuum". In its inquiry into the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy, the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (2017) suggest an alternative interpretation of the term "continuum", in relation to the categorisation of schools in Wales according to their medium of learning and teaching.

In this interpretation of the continuum, English-medium schools in the main are at one end of the continuum and Welsh-medium schools at the other, with the different types of bilingual schools in-between. In addition to interpreting the continuum as an assessment framework (W.G. Lewis, 2010a), Lewis (2011) also uses the term in reference to the wide range of bilingual education models in Wales that Baker (1993) described as a "kaleidoscopic variation": from the Welsh second language lesson in an English-medium school at one end of the bilingual continuum to education delivered almost entirely through the medium of Welsh (excluding English as a subject) at the other end. (W.G. Lewis, 2011, p. 68).

More recently, WG (2020b) interprets the continuum in the context of Welsh language education planning, in its consultation document on proposals to overhaul schools' non-statutory language categories. In the document, WG (2020b, p. 2) seeks to simplify existing language categories to address the ambiguity that may arise in their use and to allow schools to move 'along a language continuum' as they implement their Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs). Therefore, as well as being a framework of progression, it is clear that the linguistic continuum can also be interpreted as being a politically-neutral concept for the planning process of increasing Welsh-medium provision in schools, and more specifically, encouraging English-medium and bilingual schools to move further towards Welsh-medium education.

*Reinterpreting the continuum*

It appears from the literature reviewed that there is no standard definition of the language continuum and that there is inconsistency in its interpretation in the areas of bilingualism and second language acquisition, and in language and education policy in Wales. Although the language continuum probably means the framework of linguistic progression in relation to the new curriculum, it is clear that the term can be interpreted through the lens of the language learner or language community, as well as through the lens of Welsh language education planning. These alternative interpretations add to the complexities of defining the language continuum and it is argued that the lack of a standard definition of the term in the context of education policy compromises the usefulness of the continuum as a framework for learning, teaching and assessing Welsh and other languages.

It is also clear that there is now consensus in the fields of bilingualism and second language acquisition that the linguistic norms of bilingual speakers in their languages should not be compared with those of monolingual speakers (see e.g. Pavlenko and Jarvis, 2006). According to leading academics in the field such as Baker (2011), García (2009), Grosjean (2010), and Hornberger (2003), it is better to take a holistic approach to bilingualism, moving away from focusing solely on the bilingual speaker's proficiency in both languages, and considering as well their experience and use of those languages for communicative purposes in the language community. As Baker (2001, p.12) notes, functional bilingualism relates to 'language production across an encyclopedia of everyday events', and therefore the linguistic profiles of bilingual/multilingual speakers must be regarded as being unique to the individual.

This shift towards a holistic approach with an emphasis on communication appears to align with the purposes of the new Curriculum for Wales. However, there is also no reference to the term "transactional competence" in the new curriculum guidance, or a focus on the use of Welsh in the workplace. Instead, there is a focus on five other language competencies that can also be seen as critical to becoming a successful language user (Tavakoli and Jones, 2018, p. 12), namely: (i) linguistic competence;<sup>9</sup> (ii) communicative competence;<sup>10</sup> (iii) interactional competence;<sup>11</sup> (iv)

9 An understanding of language as a system with rules.

10 The ability to use language communicatively in different social contexts.

11 The ability to interact socially, and manage relationships, with others.

translingual competence;<sup>12</sup> and (v) symbolic competence<sup>13</sup> (for further discussion of language competencies, see Tavakoli and Jones, 2018 report). Although not specifically referenced, clear descriptions of the above language competencies can be found in the introduction to the AoLE, and the statements of what matters in particular (WG, 2020a, pp. 126–128).

As well as recognising the importance of gaining ‘knowledge and skills in Welsh, English and international languages’ (linguistic competence), the guidance also encourages learners to develop the ability to ‘use and adapt language in a range of roles, genres, forms, media and styles’ (communicative competence) and to ‘express themselves effectively... and to develop positive relationships’ (interactional competence) (WG, 2020a, pp. 126–127). Learners are also encouraged ‘to transfer what they have learned about how languages work in one language to the learning and using of other languages’ (translingual competence) (WG, 2020a, p. 126). In this AoLE, there is an attempt to integrate languages, literacy and communication across the new curriculum, thereby decoupling literacy and languages from assigned language lessons while implementing a truly multilingual approach. To quote the guidance again:

This multilingual and plurilingual approach is intended to ignite learners’ curiosity and enthusiasm and provide them with a firm foundation for a lifelong interest in the languages of Wales and the languages of the world; and thus to make them ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives. (WG, 2020a, p. 126)

Furthermore, the development of symbolic competence is recognised as an integral part of this AoLE, with the guidance stating that learning languages and their literature is key for learners to ‘develop not only their own sense of identity, but also an understanding of the relationship between their own cultures and communities and those of other people’ (WG, 2020a, p. 126).

More recently, WG undertook a consultation on its draft non-statutory framework to support the learning and teaching of Welsh in the English-medium sector. In the consultation document, *Framework for Welsh*, WG (2022a, p. 2) notes the different ‘competencies, experiences, knowledge and

12 The ability to draw on the whole linguistic repertoire in order to communicate purposefully in a multilingual context.

13 The ability to appreciate a language and its culture and develop an identity as a speaker of that language.

skills which underpin the progression' that learners in this sector will make in Welsh. Particularly welcome in the draft framework is the recognition of the six language competencies outlined by Tavakoli and Jones (2018). The attempt to map the language competencies, along with the experiences, knowledge and skills gained moving through the Progression Steps against the Learning Descriptions outlined in the new curriculum, is also welcomed.

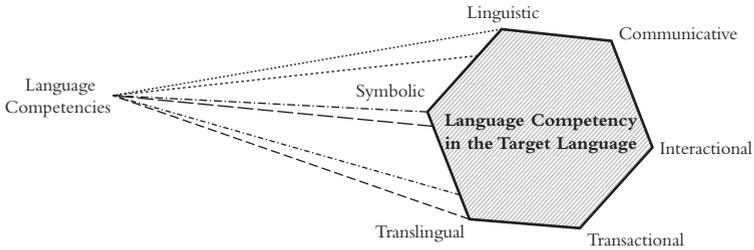
The curriculum guidance and the new Framework for Welsh appear to recognise and operate based on Tavakoli and Jones's (2018) perception that there are several language competencies which the learner needs to develop in order to become a successful language user and that these language competencies are as important as each other in terms of introducing languages in the new curriculum. These developments all establish that Welsh education policy is on the cusp of a 'multilingual turn' (Cenoz and Gorter, 2011; 2015), with the new curriculum encouraging schools to move increasingly towards a holistic or multi-competence approach (Cook, 1992, 1996, 2006, 2016; Pavlenko and Jarvis, 2006) in delivering languages.

#### *Continuum of multi-competence*

While the interpretations of the continuum reviewed are useful in visualising the metaphorical concept of learning and using language at the level of the bilingual individual, none of the above is suitable for visualising the continuum as interpreted in the new curriculum for Wales. Given the new emphasis contained in the new curriculum on developing communicative skills in Welsh, and the recognition that different types of language competence need to be developed in order to successfully becoming a functioning language user, this section of the paper presents an alternative interpretation of the continuum that aims to bridge the gap between theory and policy. A multi-competence approach, curriculum guidance, and the Framework for Welsh will underpin this continuum.

The diagram below shows how this language continuum could be visualised as a "continuum of multi-competence".

As seen in the diagram, the above continuum recognises all of the major language competencies that Tavakoli and Jones (2018) identify as key to becoming a successful language user, including "transactional competence". Considering the language continuum as a series of related continua, a holistic picture of learners' linguistic profile in the target language can be constructed; a language continuum in which no one language competence is more important than the other.



**Figure 4. Continuum of multi-competence.**

At one end of the continuum, there are new language learners who have little language competence in the target language in question. At the other end, there are functional users of language, who have an age-appropriate ability to use the target language meaningfully and successfully in a variety of communicative contexts. To the same end as the concept of “balanced bilingualism”, this interpretation suggests that achieving a balance between the different competencies is theoretically possible, if not beneficial to the learner. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that most learners will develop these competencies to varying degrees, with some competencies being developed faster than others, depending on the learning conditions and the characteristics of the learners themselves (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). It must also be recognised that learners’ progress in these different language competencies can move back and forth between the two ends, demonstrating the changing nature of a continuum. The form of the continuum will therefore vary from learner to learner, as each linguistic journey is unique.

The advantage of imagining the continuum in this way is that it gives meaningful purpose to the concept of a continuum, and teachers can apply it in mapping the linguistic progression of their learners against the AoLE’s Descriptions of Learning. Using this continuum to map learners’ language competencies in the target language enables planning to ensure that learners make appropriate progress in these competencies and support them to progress further towards becoming successful functional users of language. Given the detail of the Descriptions of Learning, framing progress in this way could be a way of simplifying visualisation and mapping of learners’ linguistic progression as they move through the Progression Steps.

It is acknowledged that this interpretation has some limitations. For example, this continuum involves only one target language, and therefore a unique continuum would have to be considered for each of the learner’s

languages. Designing a linguistic continuum for each target language could also oversimplify the complex relationships and connections found between different languages and this, in turn, could reinforce the existing disconnect between languages at a curricular level. To realise a truly multilingual approach, and to gradually move towards a policy of flexible bilingualism (Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Selleck, 2013), it would be crucial therefore to consider these different continua in relation to each other and plan for them in an appropriate manner.

### *Conclusion*

This article has explored, the concept of a language continuum. Based on the literature review, a new interpretation has been proposed, the continuum of multi-competence, which aims to bridge between the theoretical and practical considerations of the continuum, in order to improve our understanding of what it is in relation to the learning and teaching of Welsh in the new Curriculum for Wales. It is acknowledged that further collaborative work is needed with educators and policy makers to further develop this interpretation in order for the continuum to be used as a bespoke educational tool in the classroom. Others are therefore welcome to challenge or refine the interpretation presented in this paper. It is also recognised that there are still a number of unanswered questions and these must be addressed if the language continuum is to be of meaningful use to schools. Some of these questions will be considered in the paper's conclusion.

### *Towards the future: Questions for further exploration*

One of the unanswered questions so far is: What is meant by “speaker” in relation to education and the creation of new Welsh speakers? Is the ambition to ensure that every second language learner leaves statutory education as a “functioning user of language”, or a speaker with an age-appropriate ability to use the target language meaningfully and successfully in a variety of communicative contexts? If so, how do we achieve this, given the variable nature of the opportunities to use the Welsh language from one area to another in Wales? Unless there is a clearer definition of what constitutes a “speaker” in this regard, and the linguistic expectations for these learners

by the end of statutory education, the language continuum cannot be designed in a meaningful and purposeful way (Lovell, 2018).

Once these expectations are clearer to schools, it will then be possible to give fuller consideration to the next question, which is: How do we excite and inspire future learners to learn languages and encourage them to move further along the language continuum? (Lovell and Naylor, in press). The new curriculum sets a clear ambition and is an important starting point for schools. However, unless there are Welsh courses and qualifications that align with this ambition and meet the needs of learners beyond school, and schools are able to create the optimal conditions to inspire pupils to develop into independent users of language with greater responsibility for their own language learning (Rhys and Smith, 2022), it will be difficult to address the persistent problem of a lack of motivation among learners to study the language. If the ambition of the curriculum is to be realised, it will be necessary to break down the artificial boundaries between school subjects and support all teachers to design and implement a truly participatory approach that integrates the Welsh language throughout the new curriculum (Lovell, 2018). As Lovell (2018) also notes, it will be necessary to consider whether it would be advantageous in due course to move away from GCSEs as a qualification brand and A\*-U grades as a gauge of language achievement, towards describing what learners are able to achieve with language, for example, mapping learners' progress against a standard framework such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Lessons could be learned from other education sectors, such as Welsh for Adults, which already map qualifications against CEFR. However, it should be borne in mind that CEFR was not originally devised for measuring the attainment of Welsh learners aged 16 and under, and therefore further exploration is necessary with regard to what extent CEFR could form a foundation for designing a unique assessment framework for learners in statutory education.

But given that there is a shortage of Welsh and Welsh-medium teachers, how do we prepare the education workforce for this change? Rhys and Smith (2022) sum up how important it is to provide teachers with quality training in order to achieve the *Cymraeg 2050* goals:

Without investing in training for teachers, there is no hope of developing a population that might want to consider joining the teaching workforce as a second language teacher themselves, and without any increase in WaSL teachers, Welsh Government goals will never amount to anything. (Rhys and Smith, 2022, p. 24)

The commitment in the *Welsh in education workforce plan* (WG, 2022b) to address ensuring sufficient Welsh and Welsh-medium teachers is welcomed in the long term. But as the plan itself acknowledges, the current number of teachers is short of the targets set in *Cymraeg 2050*. According to the latest data analysis, there is a shortfall of 229 (7%) Welsh-medium primary teachers and 405 (14%) secondary teachers who teach Welsh as a subject or through the medium of Welsh (WG, 2022c, p. 5) compared to the targets set for 2021. Due to this shortfall, 1,029 more teachers in the primary sector and 509 more teachers in the secondary sector will be needed to meet the targets set for 2031. It is clear that training the teachers of the future continues to be a concern, as it has been for some years now (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2022). The success of introducing the continuum along with a holistic approach to learning Welsh will be largely dependent on this ongoing problem being addressed as a matter of urgency.

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