

Improving Welsh Confidence and Competence through Bilingual Delivery

Amy Lewis

ABSTRACT

The Welsh Government's 'Active Offer' strategy (2022) is aiming to increase the number of Welsh speakers by ensuring that everyone who works in Health and Social Care (H and S Care) has courtesy level Welsh. A communications module was delivered bilingually to a group of H and S Care students for ten weeks. Students rated themselves on their Welsh language speaking skills, their confidence in speaking courtesy Welsh and how important they thought it was to deliver services bilingually before and after delivery. Results showed that the students' self-reported Welsh speaking skills, confidence in using these skills and their understanding of the importance of speaking Welsh and the 'Active Offer' had increased.

Keywords: bilingualism, Welsh skills, active offer

Introduction

The Welsh language is integral to the cultural and national identity of the people in Wales. In 2017, the Welsh Government began their strategy to increase the number of people speaking and using Welsh to one million by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017).

One of the ways that the Welsh Government is working to achieve this is to take advantage of the 200,000 employees of the Health and Social Care (H and S Care) services and ensure that they all have a minimum level of 'courtesy Welsh' in order to be able to offer services through the medium of Welsh, known as the 'Active Offer' (Welsh Government, 2022a).

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With this in mind, the aim of this research was to deliver a communications module bilingually to Level 3 H and S Care students with the goal of increasing their understanding of the Active Offer and how it will affect them in their careers in the sector.

Literature

The number of people who can speak Welsh in Wales is around 20 per cent of the total population, 580,000. Those who use it daily and can speak more than a few words is around 10%, approximately 300,000 (Welsh Government, 2021). The Welsh Government hopes to increase this number to 1 million speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017).

Second language acquisition takes time to achieve and repeated exposure to the target language (Cambridge University Press, 2018). People living in Wales who are not native speakers of the language will have been exposed to Welsh to varying degrees, some through primary and/or secondary school, others through family connections or in the community (Welsh Government, 2022b). However, beyond those opportunities to use and engage with the language, unless they have sought out opportunities to use and develop Welsh language skills after age sixteen, many speakers will not have spoken Welsh for a number of years despite having basic level skills in the language (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2023). This is a challenge when such speakers enter professions where basic levels of Welsh language ability are required. One such profession is H and S Care (Welsh Government, 2019a).

The particular Level 3 H and S Care course that this study was carried out with are designed for mature students who specifically want to enter Higher Education. The course attracts people who mostly want to progress into nursing, social work and other allied health professions. When entering these professions there will be an expectation that these graduates will have courtesy Welsh which is defined as an ability to

- pronounce Welsh language words, names, place names and terms,
- answer the phone bilingually,
- greet people or make introductions bilingually,

- understand and use proactively everyday expressions and simple key words relating to the workplace,
- read and understand short texts, provide basic information and demonstrate language awareness – which includes an awareness of what is required to provide bilingual customer service. (Welsh Government, 2020)

In order to allow students to develop these skills, we adapted a module that would focus directly on these skills, whilst also introducing more Welsh (i.e. increasing the bilingual dimension) of the delivery, moving from B3 to B2 on the bilingual continuum (Sgiliaith, 2022). B2 means that a significant amount of Welsh-medium learning, both verbal and written, needs to be used in most parts of the learning. Assessment can be mainly in English but some may also be in Welsh. The overall aim was for the students to become more proficient in courtesy Welsh and ensure they understood what the Active Offer was and what it meant for them entering health care.

The Welsh Government's (2022c) language standards suggest that all communication and marketing should be presented side by side bilingually with the Welsh first and not treated any less favourably. For the module under investigation in this research, this was translated into practice as the best way to deliver bilingual materials in a classroom session, through presenting all materials in both Welsh and English. Other bilingual strategies used included greeting learners and giving simple commands and praise in Welsh, in line with courtesy Welsh ideas. All sessions were also supported through utilising resources available on Hwb (2022), which has a collection of online tools, and the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2024), which provides resources through Y Porth specifically to help Further Education colleges and universities create opportunities to train and study in Welsh.

Methods

Ethics

This study was conducted as part of an FE college's action research strategy. The ethics committee reviewed and approved the research proposal, ensuring it met all necessary ethical standards. Participants received detailed information sheets

detailing the purpose of the project, what would be involved, what their data would be used for, what they would have to do and any risks/benefits of taking part. Participants were then asked to sign a consent form confirming that they had read the information sheet, understood their participation was voluntary and agreed to their data being used.

Participants and Sampling

Convenience sampling was used as the module was already being delivered to three groups of Level 3 H and S Care students. The initial sample was made up of 44 students, across three teaching groups. This was the whole cohort of this course to ensure parity of learning experience. The sample was mainly female (92 per cent) and the age range was 18–48 years. After the ten-week module delivery the questionnaire was redistributed and 34 participants completed (77 per cent of the original participants). The language abilities of the participants pre and post module intervention are presented in the results.

Data generation

The bilingual delivery lasted the duration of the module (ten weeks). Before the module commenced, the participants filled in a questionnaire which asked them to:

1. Rate their Welsh language speaking skills using the Welsh language skills framework
2. Rate their confidence in using their Welsh language speaking skills
3. Rate how important they thought it was to be able to offer services in Welsh and
4. A longer written answer explaining their answer to question 3

This questionnaire was then repeated at the end of the module. The Welsh Language Framework used is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which divides languages into four areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. People can rate themselves on these four areas separately between no skills (0), entry (1), foundation (2), intermediate (3), advanced (4) and proficient (5) (Council of Europe, 2024). The speaking options that were offered to participants were based on those available through Denbighshire County Council (2024) and can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1: Denbighshire County Council Welsh Language Skills Framework

Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
No current level of Welsh language skills	Can say place names / Welsh first names or Welsh signs correctly Can greet and introduce others in Welsh Can show linguistic courtesy by opening and closing a conversation Can give and receive personal detail	Can understand the essence of Conversation in Welsh Can convey basic information e.g. simple admin or routine tasks Can give and receive instructions and directions	Can converse partly in Welsh but turns to English in discussion and to give detail information can describe people and locations	Can contribute effectively in meetings within their own area of work and argue for or against a case. can deal with people in most situations in Welsh but turns to English when dealing with complex situations	Can deal effectively with complex discussion and questions in Welsh can adjust the style of language to suit all situations and needs

The bilingual delivery included greeting learners in Welsh, all resources being presented bilingually and side by side, relevant short courses being embedded within lessons, case studies in Welsh or with a Welsh context, overview of the laws in Wales related to the Active Offer, highlighted Welsh vocabulary, opportunities to practise conversational Welsh, completion of a glossary of useful Welsh phrases and finally role playing activities utilising the Welsh development officers. For more detail on the resources and Welsh delivery please see appendix 1.

Weekly, participants filled in an electronic exit ticket, asking what they specifically enjoyed about the bilingual delivery and what they felt could be improved.

Descriptive statistics around the quantitative questions are displayed in the tables in the result section below. The qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis by ChatGPT 3.5, which, due to the short and simple nature of the responses, is a promising assistive tool (Lee, Van der Lubbe, Goh and Valderas, 2024). This analysis was also human cross-checked for accuracy.

Results and discussion

Quantitative results

Results from the pre- and post-delivery questionnaire showed that on the whole students felt that their Welsh language skills (Table 1) had improved, with fewer

Table 1. Welsh language speaking skills using the Welsh language skills framework

	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Before	34%	52%	14%	0	0	0
After	9%	35%	56%	0	0	0
% change	(↓25%)	(↓17%)	(↑42%)			

Table 2. Confidence in conversing in Welsh at a basic level

	Not confident at all	Not very confident	Slightly confident	Very confident
Before	32%	34%	32%	2%
After	6%	17%	68%	9%
% change	(↓26%)	(↓17%)	(↑36%)	(↑7%)

Table 3. The importance of being able to speak and offer Health and Social Care services in Welsh

	Not important at all	Not very important	Slightly important	Very important
Before	4.5%	4.5%	36%	55%
After	0	6%	24%	70%
% change	(↓4.5%)	(↑1.5%)	(↓12%)	(↑15%)

learners identifying as Level 0 and 1 and more at Level 2 (more than 50 per cent compared to 14 per cent pre delivery). The students' confidence in using their basic Welsh skills had doubled, with 77 per cent now feeling slightly or very confident compared to 34 per cent pre delivery (Table 2). Finally, their opinions of the importance of being able to speak and offer services in Welsh had changed in terms of importance from only 55 per cent thinking it was very important, to 70 per cent now thinking it was very important (Table 3).

Table 4. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses before delivery

Theme	Example of direct quotes from anonymised participants
Cultural and National Identity: sense of pride in the Welsh language, language as identity and preserving Welsh	‘It is the national language of Wales, and we should be proud to speak it and have our own language. Welsh is growing in popularity with more Welsh schools, so could become very relevant in the future.’ P18
Communication in Health and Social Care: Importance of Welsh in this sector, comforting and reducing anxiety	‘I think it is important to be able to speak and offer services in Welsh as it offers comfort for Welsh speakers and may be an individual’s first or preferred language.’ P35
Employability and Opportunities: More job opportunities, enhanced employability	‘I think it is very important as health and social care professionals deal with people from all different ethnic backgrounds with different Languages, there are many in Wales who speak Welsh and it is important for us to be able to understand and talk to them in a language they’re comfortable and confident in.’ P41
Inclusivity and Accessibility: Welsh speakers need services in preferred language, building rapport and trust	‘I think it is important as there are many Welsh speakers in Wales who find it more comfortable to speak Welsh, so being able to communicate with them, will help build rapport as well as privacy if needed.’ P13
Varied Importance Levels: range of opinions, influenced by factors such as geographical location, work environment, and personal preferences, some said essential, others less important to them specifically	‘I do believe it’s important, however I chose “slightly important” because I currently work within the health setting and have been for 10 years and I haven’t encountered no individuals that want to converse in Welsh or use the Welsh language.’ P36

(Open AI, 2024)

Table 5. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses after delivery

Theme	Example of direct quotes from anonymised participants
Communication and Comfort in Healthcare: emphasis on comfortable and at ease, building rapport, trust, relationships between healthcare providers and service users.	'I think Welsh in health and social care is very important, because it can make the service user feel more comfortable and they will be able to trust the health/social care worker.' P9
Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity: strong emphasis on respecting Welsh speakers culture and identity by offering services, seen as an act of integrity, respect, and inclusivity	'I think Welsh in health and social care is very important, because it can make the service user feel more comfortable and they will be able to trust the health/social care worker.' P35
Professional and Personal Development: Important for Welsh culture, job opportunities and improve communication in the sector	'I think it's important as it open up a lot more job opportunities,also help you with communication barrier.' P16
Patient-Centred Care: Patients preferences and needs, overcoming language barriers, diverse environment that ensures effective communication and patient satisfaction.	'Even though our country is dominant in English speaking, a lot of people still might only speak Welsh or prefer the Welsh language. It is important to cater to all to ensure everyone is at their happiest and the most comfortable.' P13
Balancing Practicality and Importance: practical challenges, time consuming, importance of Welsh language skills was acknowledged, but there was also an awareness of the need to balance inclusivity with practical considerations.	'I think it is slightly important because whilst it is very important to be inclusive, and not discriminate and to encourage the native language from dying out, It can also cause a lot of confusion and be time consuming when dealing with patients which may cause delays (through the need of obtaining a translator etc).' P34

(Open AI, 2024)

Qualitative results based on the importance of being able to speak and offer services in Welsh

Open AI (ChatGPT 3.5) identified the top five themes before delivery as (i) Welsh being important as part of cultural and national identity; (ii) that it was important due to working in the H and S Care sector and being able to communicate with patients; (iii) that it enhanced employability and job opportunities; (iv) that it increased inclusivity and accessibility; and (v) importance levels were influenced by geographical location, work environment, and personal preferences. These themes were cross checked by the author to ensure validity. The author agreed that these five themes were present.

After receiving the ten-week module, participants' responses to the same questions changed focus from the rights of the patients and importance of the language to the clear advantages of its use whilst also reflecting on the practicalities of its delivery. The top five themes after delivery changed to (i) communication and how it made patients feel more comfortable; (ii) that it was respectful and sensitive to people's culture; (iii) that it was useful for personal and professional development; (iv) that it allowed for full person centred care and that (v) although it was important, the practicalities of it needed to be balanced.

Overall the students' self-reported Welsh speaking skills, confidence in using these skills and their understanding of the importance of speaking Welsh and the Active Offer had increased. The qualitative responses generally showed an improved understanding of the importance of Welsh in healthcare, with a shift towards recognising its broader impact on patients and healthcare professionals.

Although the feedback was positive and students were happy to practise their Welsh in class, when they had the opportunity to include Welsh in their assignment only a small minority took up the opportunity which could indicate some social desirability bias despite the questionnaires being anonymous.

Conclusion

The module taught appears to be an effective method for boosting Level 3 Health and Social Care students' understanding of the Welsh Government's Active Offer

and their confidence in using courtesy Welsh. The findings indicate that a carefully planned bilingual approach can improve learners' basic Welsh language skills, enhance their confidence in using the language, and deepen their appreciation of its relevance within the health and social care sector. Quantitative results showed clear improvements in self-assessed language ability and perceived importance of Welsh, while qualitative data reflected a notable shift in attitudes – from abstract ideas of national identity to more practical, patient-centred considerations.

Despite the positive outcomes, the limited use of Welsh in assessed work suggests that increased awareness and appreciation may not immediately translate into active language use, possibly due to residual anxiety, limited confidence, or perceived barriers in professional settings. These findings suggest that while short-term interventions can be effective in shifting attitudes and foundational skills, sustained exposure and practice are essential to embed bilingual competence more fully.

This study highlights the value of embedding bilingual education in courses that support the Welsh Government's wider goal of normalising the use of Welsh in everyday professional contexts. As the health and social care workforce continues to grow, initiatives like this can play a crucial role in creating an inclusive service that respects and reflects the needs of Welsh-speaking communities.

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