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Research report for external body :

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Rapid Evidence Assessment: Effective Second Language Teaching Approaches and Methods. Executive Summary

1.   Research aim and objectives

1.1   The aim of this Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) is to inform Welsh Government (WG) planning for delivery of Welsh language provision for learners aged 3-16. In order to do this the REA assesses research on language teaching practices and interventions used in contexts parallel or comparable to Wales.

1.2   The three main WG policies which provide the context of the REA are:

- *Cymraeg 2050 – A million Welsh speakers*
- *A Curriculum for Wales – A Curriculum for Life*
- *Education in Wales: Our National Mission*

1.3   The project is intended to contribute to WG awareness and appreciation of approaches and/or methods that are likely to give learners effective functional skills in the Welsh language by the age of 16. This report therefore addresses the following research question:

> What teaching approaches and methods are effective in developing young learners' second language competence, according to high quality empirical evidence?

1.4   Four main objectives were identified for the project:

- **Objective A** – to conduct a search and scrutiny of published research within the parameters defined for the project;
- **Objective B** – to produce a state of the art synthesis of the most relevant and highest quality research, organised thematically;
- **Objective C** – to assess how the research findings map onto Welsh language pedagogy (3-16 year olds), particularly in the context of policy aims;
- **Objective D** – to indicate related research areas which, while outside the scope of this report, will be key to achieving policy aims.

1.5   The project parameters required that research would only be regarded as relevant and suitable for inclusion when it:

- Was directly or indirectly relevant to language learners aged 3-16 years old.
- Was directly or indirectly relevant to the context of teaching Welsh in Wales (for example, it had relevance to the teaching of non-dominant target languages).

- Focused on "approach" and / or "method". Research on theoretical models, or teaching techniques / activities were only included if they were relevant to an approach or method.[1]
- Addressed deliberate, within class, teaching of second languages that are human, written/spoken, languages.

2.   Methodology

2.1   The breadth and quantity of research literature with potential relevance to the main project aim is extensive. Application of the parameters together with carefully formulated search terms and criteria, maximised both the feasibility of the REA and its fitness-for-purpose.

2.2   The investigation proceeded in four phases, creating an initial database of 5861 items (Phase 1), of which 106 were included in the final synthesis of evidence (Phase 4):

i)   Search (Phase 1): six databases/platforms were selected and search terms (for both languages) were identified and trialled. As 2001 was a significant year in language teaching pedagogy, it was decided to limit searches to outputs with a post-2000 date of publication. After the initial searches were conducted, supplementary searches were carried out to ensure that no relevant items would be missed and to enable the capture of grey literature as well as any highly relevant items outside the inclusion zones or database capture for the electronic searches.

ii)   Screening (Phase 2): the 5861 items emerging from Phase 1 were subjected to screening and categorisation. All items to be included in Phase 3 needed to satisfy an agreed set of relevance criteria. From the items that satisfied these criteria, preliminary categorisation data was extracted and a provisional taxonomy of eight thematic competences was compiled. These categories were used to cluster research outputs in Phases 3 and 4.

iii)   Detailed data extraction and weighing of evidence (Phase 3): full texts of the 309 studies emerging from Phase 2 were obtained and grouped according to their thematic domain. A refined list of competences emerged at this stage:

- Vocabulary;
- Grammar;
- Reading;
- Writing;
- Speaking and Listening;
- General language.

A Data Extraction form consisting of 60 questions was adapted to fit the purpose of the REA, and was used to scrutinise and assess evidence from research items.[2] Assessments of the 'trustworthiness', 'appropriateness' and 'relevance' of each item derived from this process, and these were summarised in a composite weighting of the evidence ('High', 'Medium' or 'Low').

iv)   Clustering items and synthesising key findings (Phase 4): only the 106 items that scored a composite High were included in this final phase. They were then grouped according to the list of competences and the key findings were synthesised.

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[1] In this REA 'Approach' is defined as a set of values, principles, and beliefs about factors that drive learning, and 'Method' as the systematic engagement of learners with language.
[2] This was adapted from the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information (EPPI) Data Extraction form (EPPI-Centre (2007) Review Guidelines for Extracting Data and Quality Assessing Primary Studies in Educational Research. Version 2.0 London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit).

3.   Key findings

3.1   Key findings under the six competence areas:

Vocabulary:

- Learners in CLIL contexts tend to perform better on vocabulary tests than non-CLIL learners, but evidence for this is not consistent, and can be attributed to factors other than teaching method/approach.
- Focusing attention and intentional learning activity on form and meaning of individual vocabulary items enhances vocabulary uptake, but this must be strategically applied.
- Input-only instruction (including L2 television) is effective in terms of vocabulary uptake, and learning gains are enhanced further when input is supplemented with interaction.
- Vocabulary learning is facilitated by tasks with high involvement load.
- Integrating creative imagery can boost vocabulary uptake; integrating gesture and movement yields more modest gains.
- Timing and variety of mini-interventions in learning has a significant impact on effective learning, regardless of approach/method.

Grammar:

- Explicit instruction is effective, but rarely more effective than other types of instruction, in developing grammatical competence.
- Both inductive and deductive types of explicit instruction are effective, but inductive may be slightly more effective under certain conditions.
- CLIL is more effective than teaching a language as a school subject for the development of some areas of grammatical competence.
- Although CLIL appears to be a particularly effective method, this may well be the result of the greater exposure to the target language enjoyed by these students, rather than of the methodology per se.
- There may be an optimum age (12?) at which to commence CLIL instruction.
- Attention to prosodic features (e.g. rhyme, rhythm) in oral input can aid the development of grammatical competence.
- Both oracy and literacy approaches in primary school can be effective in developing grammatical competence.
- Teacher language competence and number of hours' instruction are more influential factors than instruction type.

Reading:

- Instruction for the development of reading skills needs to include explicit attention to both lower-level and higher-level processes; it cannot be assumed that either will be transferred from a student's L1 without instruction.
- Phonological training can help beginner learners to process word forms, but not necessarily word meanings.
- Technology can contribute to the development of oral reading fluency by facilitating student-centred learning.
- In contrast to paper-based learning, computer-assisted learning of reading enhances focus on task, reduces teacher dependency, and benefits lower ability learners.
- Strategy instruction is an effective method of developing reading comprehension skills.
- Multiple strategies can be taught together, but not in excessive quantities.
- Reading materials which are adapted to reduce cognitive load can scaffold comprehension.

Writing:

- Technology has a potentially important role to play in writing development if carefully implemented.
- Technology cannot be assumed to be advantageous merely by its presence; its use must be informed and planned.
- Learners require training in using ICT-based information for writing.
- Use of ICT requires specific classroom management techniques.
- Pupils with limited technological skills must be appropriately supported.
- Interactive writing tasks promote proficiency and engagement.
- Combining literacy and oracy teaching can be beneficial, especially in mixed ability classes.
- Strategy training (e.g. planning, morphological awareness, cognitive strategies) can improve writing performance.

Speaking and Listening:

- Approaches that create meaningful interaction more positively affect speaking skills than activities where the focus is on form.
- Game-based activities (in contrast to e.g. drill-based) have a positive effect on pronunciation and communicative achievement.
- Spoken production (though not necessarily pronunciation) tends to be more advanced among CLIL than non-CLIL students. However, this cannot be attributed to CLIL alone.
- Online interaction and interaction with robots can be equally as effective as face-to-face interaction in creating an effective learning environment for spoken interaction.
- Opportunities to interact and to make language errors are important to the development of speaking skills.
- Use of automatic speech recognition (ASR) technology to provide feedback aids pronunciation and is more efficient but not necessarily more effective than a teacher.
- Task repetition aids pronunciation.
- Supporting authentic listening material (even with L2 input in a different medium) and moderating input both aid comprehension.
- Pre- listening support aids comprehension.
- Strategy Instruction or providing opportunities for students to develop strategies for speaking and listening improves both competences.

General language:

- It is difficult to draw any strong conclusions in terms of the direct effect of CLIL as in most studies the amount of exposure to language was greater than for the control non-CLIL groups.
- Some evidence suggests that short-term intensive language programmes may be more effective than 'drip feed programmes'.
- Form focused instruction should be strategically deployed, and may be more beneficial to older children.
- Data driven learning can develop language sensitivity, noticing, and inductive skills, and encourages autonomous learning and engagement with authentic language.
- There is little evidence to suggest that use of songs in class promotes language uptake.
- Approaches and methods can be less influential on learning than factors such as teachers' language confidence, opportunities for language exposure, societal and educational context for learning, effective teacher training and ongoing skills development, motivating learners and making the language relevant to them in terms of their interests, community and identity.

Summary of findings applied to the Welsh context:

3.2   Maximising exposure to the target language is common to many of the findings. This could be achieved by use of Welsh elsewhere in the curriculum (CLIL), within the school as part of a school language policy, or through the use of technology. Calls for CLIL such as Harris & Ó Duíbhir (2011)'s could be considered in the Welsh context although findings also suggest that CLIL may be more effective precisely because it tends to equate with an increase in contact hours. CLIL is shown to be most effective when combined with greater exposure to the language and when this happens consistently for a longer duration. If there is a subsequent reduction in contact hours or exposure to the language, then the benefits of CLIL can be eroded. On that basis, there would need to be an agreed optimum number of teaching time/hours to maximise contact with Welsh consistently across all Key Stages.

3.3   The educational context in which learning happens and incidental use of the language throughout the school were found to be influential factors. Therefore, any movement towards developing CLIL in the Welsh context would require negotiations with the wider school community to ensure support for developments of this nature, including a realisation that there would be implications for teachers' training/development.

3.4   Oracy and literacy approaches to teaching and learning a language at primary level can both be effective in developing grammatical competence and writing skills. These can be supplemented by the incidental use of prosodic features at this level too.

3.5   Meaningful interaction, particularly with an emphasis on use of authentic materials, has a positive effect on speaking skills, and may be just as effective when conducted on-line as face-to-face; this is important for teaching and learning in communities where there is less opportunity for face-to-face interaction. There is evidence that focus on form can also be beneficial, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4.

3.6   Planned use of technology and data driven learning is shown to have potential in developing skills and promoting more general language awareness. In the Welsh context, this could also involve greater use of (and cooperation with) other authentic Welsh language sources such as S4C and Radio Cymru (broadcasts and web-based materials).

3.7   There is a need to ensure that any advances in teaching Welsh at primary level are sustained and continue to be developed effectively at secondary level.

3.8   Affective factors: although these are outside the scope of this REA, many findings refer to the importance of motivation and enjoyment in maximising achievement. It is clear, therefore, that the wider societal and educational context of learning Welsh as a second language and its association with learners' motivation(s) need further exploration.

4.   Future research imperatives

4.1   There are a number of key psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and educational and affective issues which were excluded from the scope of the REA but which are relevant to the future of effective Welsh language education and merit research attention. These include:

- Bilingualism and the "cognitive advantage";
- Identity and language learning motivation;
- Cross linguistic relations, translanguaging, and bi-literacy;
- Effectiveness of immersion education.

4.2   A number of themes emerged repeatedly from the research literature assessed in this REA and these warrant further investigation in the Welsh context. They include:

I.   The learning environment should facilitate exposure to the target language, including in non-traditional and creative ways.

II. Attention must be paid to learners' linguistic landscape, and the societal and educational context for learning.

III. Technological developments and tools offer valuable opportunities for language teaching and learning, but only if they are used in an informed way.

IV. Teacher education should be focused on producing teachers who are responsive to learning needs and processes.