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Context

Sociolinguistic competence – that is, the ability to vary one’s language to engage in a variety of interactions both formal and informal – is an important part of gaining a “nativelike ability in the target language” (Hansen-Edwards, 2011: 1258). Previous studies of French (Mougeon et al, 2010) have demonstrated that students in French immersion education in Canada do not often encounter the more colloquial forms at school, due to the formal nature of classroom language.

Recent Welsh Government targets (2017) to increase the number of Welsh speakers to 1 million by the year 2050 places a responsibility on teachers to ensure that students gain a full grasp of native-like or fluent variation in order to be fluent in a variety of contexts. Educators of Welsh, both as a first language (W1L) and as a second language (W2L), are expected to teach varieties of Welsh which are appropriate in a number of different registers (WJEC, 2015; WJEC, 2017) conforming to academic, workplace and more casual community norms, thus improving the sociolinguistic competence of their students.

However, little research exists on the sociolinguistic variation that takes place in Welsh classrooms around Wales. This project examined teachers’ perceptions of their own and students’ use of features which have been shown to vary between registers.

Summary of aims

The research set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 What kind of language variation takes place in Welsh language classrooms according to teachers?

RQ2 What are teachers’ attitudes towards marked casual socio-stylistic variation in their classrooms?

RQ3 To what extent does the type of Welsh taught (W1L, W2L or W1L+W2L) impact teachers’ formality and attitudes towards the socio-stylistic variation in the classroom?

Design

Questionnaire data were collected from first language (W1L) and second language (W2L) teachers of Welsh across Wales. A total of 98 teachers completed an online survey and reported on the type of linguistic variation occurring in teachers’ and students’ language across features known to vary in Welsh, in different contexts known to occur in classrooms (formal and informal, both spoken and written). A framework was developed to quantitatively analyse both the degree of formality and attitudes towards the socio-stylistic variation of the following features:

- Possessive pronouns (fy nghar/car fi)
- Auxiliary ‘bod’ (Rwyf/Rydw i/Dw i/Fi etc)
- Plural suffixes (pethau/petha/pethe)
- Demonstrative adjectives (hwn/yma)
- ‘is’ variation (yw/ydy/ydi)
- (f) ending (nesaf/nesa’)
- Possessive constructions (mae gen i/fi gyda etc.)
- Phrasal verbs (tyfu i fyny, ysgrifennu i lawr, troi i ffwrdd)
- Overgeneralisation of ‘cael’ (fi’n cael brawd)
- Plural adjectives (rhosod coch)
- ‘yes’ forms (Wyt ti’n mwynhau...? Ie.)

Each of the features above was scored on its formality based on existing literature which provided a total formality score per feature, for teachers and students, and for each context of use. The higher scores represent the use of more formal variants, whereas the lower scores represent the more casual use of variants (most formal=5, neutral=3, most casual=1). Teacher attitudes towards features were measured using Likert scale questions based on the likelihood of correcting a feature in each context. In this instance, the lower numbers represent a low tolerance for non-standard variants, whereas where features score more highly, they are more widely accepted. Qualitative data was also collected in the questionnaire on the teachers’ attitudes to variation which were analysed to support the quantitative findings.

Findings (1)

Overall, a strong correlation ($r_s = 0.802$) was found between teacher and student formality, though teachers on the whole were 6.4% more formal. Three main types of variation were identified in the teachers' self-reported data; a) distinctions between classroom language and language outside the classroom, b) distinctions between speaking and writing, c) no clear distinctions between contexts.

A) Classroom vs outside of the classroom

⇒ Possessive pronouns (*fy nghar/car fi*)

	Speaking in class	Writing	Speaking outside class	Mean formality score
Teacher	4	4.15	3.73	3.93
Student	2.52	2.81	2.14	2.50

- Teachers reported that the difference between their use of variants was significant between contexts ($p < 0.001$) whereas they claim their students' use was not ($p = 0.355$).
- Clear distinctions can be seen between the classroom context (speaking in class and writing) and the out-of-class context.
- Statistical testing revealed that the mean formality score (as reported by teachers) was significantly higher for teachers than their students ($p < 0.001$), showing that teachers consider their use to be more formal than students.

B) Speaking vs writing

⇒ Auxiliary 'bod' (*Rwyf/Rydw i/Dw i/Fi* etc)

	Speaking in class	Writing	Speaking outside class	Mean formality score
Teacher	2.10	3.33	1.71	2.40
Student	1.71	2.69	1.74	2.04

- Teachers reported that differences between their use of auxiliary 'bod' and the use of students was significant (teachers $p < 0.001$, students $p < 0.001$) between contexts with a clear distinction between mean writing score and speaking scores.
- Teachers were significantly ($p < 0.001$) more formal than their students.

⇒ Plural suffixes (*pethau/petha/pethe*)

	Speaking in class	Writing	Speaking outside class	Mean formality score
Teacher	2	2.93	1.53	2.16
Student	2.19	2.73	2.16	2.37

- Teachers reported that difference between their use of plural suffixes and the use of students was significant (teachers $p < 0.001$, students $p < 0.001$) between contexts with a clear distinction between reported writing scores and speaking scores.
- In contrast with other features analysed, students are reported to use the more formal suffix *-au*, with statistically significant ($p = 0.009$) differences found between the more formal students' score and the teachers' more casual score.

⇒ (f) ending (*nesaf/nesa'*)

	Speaking in class	Writing	Speaking outside class	Mean formality score
Teacher	3.51	4.80	3.23	3.85
Student	3.76	4.44	3.70	3.99

- The difference between teachers' and students' use of (f) ending was significant between contexts (teachers $p < 0.001$, students $p < 0.001$) with a clear distinction between spoken and written contexts.
- Similar to the plural suffix, teachers claim that students' use of the (f) ending is more formal than their own use.
- Based on what teachers reported, teachers' and students' reported formality scores were not found to be significantly different ($p = 0.152$).

⇒ Possessive constructions (*mae gen i/fi gyda* etc.)

	Speaking in class	Writing	Speaking outside class	Mean formality score
Teacher	2.81	3.42	2.43	2.89
Student	2.47	2.84	2.40	2.59

- The difference between teachers' and students' use of possessive constructions (*mae gennyf, mae gen i/gyda fi, mae 'da fi, fi gyda*) was significant between contexts (teachers $p < 0.001$, students $p = 0.007$) with a clear distinction between mean writing score and mean speaking outside class score.
- Teachers claimed there was a statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) difference between the formality scores of teachers and students.

C) No clear distinctions between contexts

- According to the teachers' claims, demonstrative adjectives and 'is' forms do not significantly vary between contexts in Welsh classrooms (see table below).
- No statistical significance was found between the reported formality of teachers and students (demonstrative adjectives $p = 0.136$) ('is' variation $p = 0.168$).

⇒ Demonstrative adjectives (<i>hwn/yma</i>)	
Non-significant variation across context	Mean formality
Teacher $p = 0.025$	3.65
Student $p = 0.920$	3.26
⇒ 'is' variation (<i>yw/ydy/ydi</i>)	
Non-significant variation across context	Mean formality
Teacher $p = 0.608$	1.66
Student $p = 0.487$	1.56

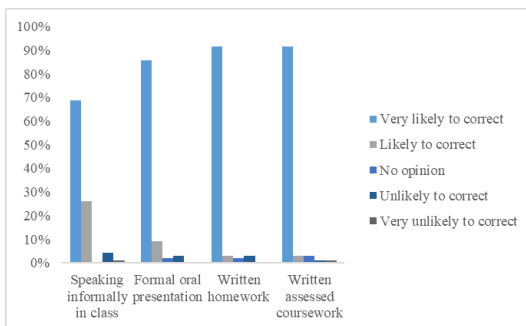
Findings (2)

The study also explored attitudes towards types of variation using Likert scale and open-ended questions to determine the teachers' tolerance score (out of 5) for each of the following features.

	Speaking informally in class	Oral presentation	Written homework	Written coursework	Overall tolerance mean
Over-generalisation of 'cael'	1.45	1.22	1.16	1.16	1.25
Yes forms	2	1.48	1.44	1.37	1.57
Possessive pronoun	2.37	1.47	1.44	1.32	1.65
Phrasal verbs	2.83	2.69	2.48	2.44	2.56
Plural adjectives	3.73	3.38	3.12	3.02	3.31

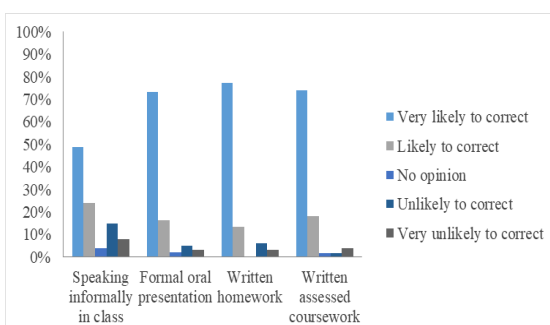
⇒ Overgeneralisation of 'cael' (fi'n cael brawd)

- This feature was the most stigmatised, and least tolerated across all classroom contexts (overall mean tolerance = 1.25).
- A Fisher's exact test showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between acceptance of the feature between contexts, with likelihood to correct increasing as the situation becomes more formal.



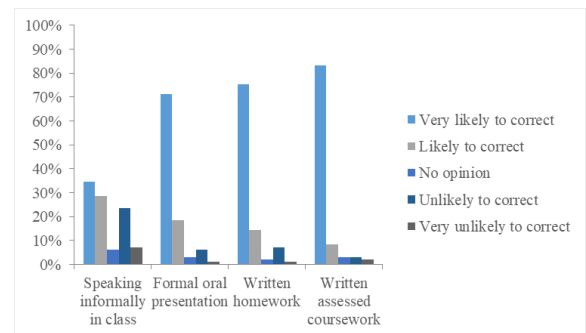
⇒ 'yes' forms (Wyt ti'n mwynhau...le)

- Using 'ie' as a response to questions rather than the more syntactically appropriate variation also received an overall low tolerance score (1.57).
- A Fisher's exact test found a significant difference in attitude according to context, with tolerance decreasing as the register becomes more formal ($p = 0.0015$).



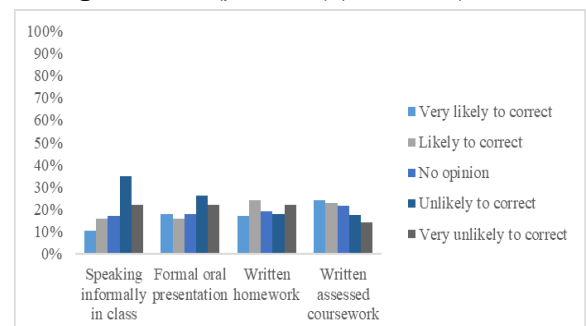
⇒ Possessive pronouns (Mam fi)

- (Overall mean tolerance of this feature = 1.65)
- Statistically significant difference between contexts ($p < 0.001$) was revealed through Fisher's exact test, showing once more that teachers expect their students to conform with these socio-stylistic norms.



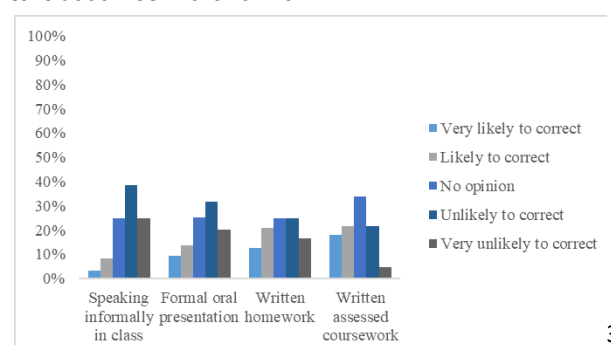
⇒ Phrasal verbs (ysgrifennu i lawr/troi i ffwrdd/tyfu i fyny)

- Ysgrifennu i lawr* (mean tolerance score = 1.97) and *troi i ffwrdd* (mean tolerance score = 2.60) both revealed a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.006$; $p = 0.004$) between contexts, with tolerance decreasing as the context became more formal.
- Tyfu i fyny*, on the other hand, was more highly tolerated (mean tolerance score = 3.11) across all contexts. No significant difference was found in acceptability of use according to context ($p = 0.100$) (see below).



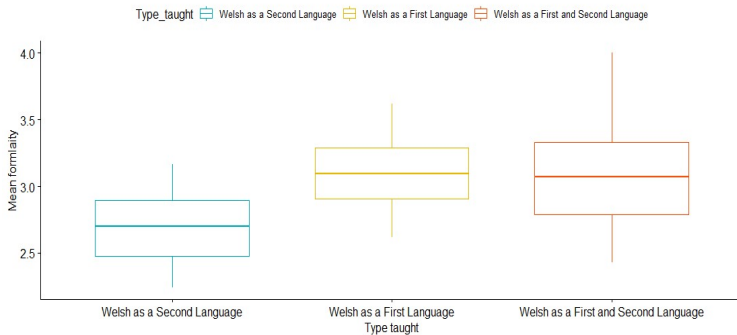
⇒ Plural adjectives (rhosod coch/rhosod cochion)

- The non-pluralisation of adjectives is relatively positively perceived by participating teachers (mean tolerance score = 3.31).
- Similar to previous patterns, the mean Likert scale responses for the non-pluralised adjective *rhosod coch* show a significant ($p = 0.004$) decline in acceptability as the context becomes more formal.

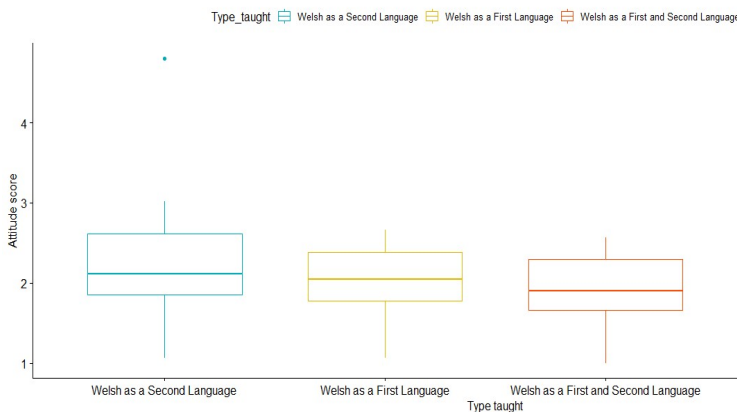


Findings (3)

- The formality scores of teachers varied statistically significantly between teachers of W1L, W2L and teachers who taught both (W1L+W2L) ($p < 0.001$).



- The highest levels of teacher formality were reported in W1L classroom settings, followed closely by W1L+W2L settings.
- No statistically significant difference was found in teachers' likelihood to correct stigmatised features based on the type (W1L or W2L) of Welsh taught ($p = 0.071$). Teachers of W2L were more tolerant of stigmatised features such as the overgeneralization of *cael* and 'yes' forms.



- However, the phrasal verb *tyfu i fyny* was accepted to the same extent by W1L and W2L teachers (see tolerance scores in the table below). This was the phrasal verb least associated with English contact and most widely accepted by teachers across contexts.
- Interestingly, W1L teachers were more tolerant of plural adjectives than W2L teachers.

Summary of Findings

- Teachers reported higher levels of formality in their own Welsh compared with that of their students across all but two features. According to teachers, students are more likely to use more formal variants of plural suffixes and (f) endings (*pethau* rather than *petha* or *pethe*, and *nesaf* rather than *nesa*).
- Overall, according to teachers reports, the writing contexts elicited the most formal responses, with out-of-class speech eliciting the most casual responses.
- The demonstrative adjectives (*hwn*, *hon* and *hyn* vs *yma* and *yna*) variants were reportedly used interchangeably across contexts, disproving the literature which claims they belong to "strikingly" different registers (Morris Jones, 1993: 75). Forms of 'is' did not vary according to context either, potentially due to dialectal differences (*yw* vs *ydy*).
- A strong correlation ($r_s = 0.802$) was found between the way students and teachers were reported to vary their language across contexts.
- The study confirmed that marked or stigmatised casual features are increasingly corrected when the register of a context becomes more formal, demonstrating teachers' expectations for the sociolinguistic development of their students.
- The overgeneralisation of *cael* was the most negatively perceived of the features under study, even though it is a feature reported to be prevalent in young people's speech for more than twenty years (Jones, 1998).
- The non-pluralisation of adjectives (*rhosod coch* rather than *rhosod cochion*) is not viewed as a stigmatised feature; rather, it appears to be an accepted norm among teachers.
- The phrasal verb *tyfu i fyny* was not found to be an effective marker of sociolinguistic competence; teachers did not expect it to vary according to context.
- Teachers of W1L were reported to use more formal language than teachers of W2L.
- Teachers of W1L, W2L and W1L+W2L reported similar levels of tolerance for stigmatised features.

Type taught	Over-generalisation of	Yes forms	Possessive pronoun	Ysgrifennu i lawr	Troi i ffrwdd	Tyfu i fyny	Plural adjectives	Mean tolerance
W1L+W2L	1.25	1.35	1.85	1.82	2.48	2.65	2.91	2.05
W1L	1.15	1.41	1.44	2.39	2.58	3.21	3.44	2.23
W2L	1.36	1.86	1.77	2.44	2.67	3.22	3.37	2.39
Mean	1.25	1.58	1.65	2.29	2.60	3.11	3.31	2.26

Significance and Implications

- This is the first work of its kind to explore the linguistic variation in Welsh classrooms.
- It contributes to our understanding of the extent of sociolinguistic competence (a sign of native-like mastery of a language) in schools, in light of Welsh Government's 2050 target to increase the number of Welsh speakers to one million.
- Teachers feel that both they and students vary their language (though to different extents) to match certain registers; therefore they do possess sociolinguistic competence.
- Though plentiful, all data discussed in this research is reported by teachers, and therefore not an accurate representation of the actual variation which takes place in the classroom. It provides a strong basis from which to conduct an imminent PhD which will look at the actual usage of variation by students, collecting naturally occurring speech in a number of registers.
- Initial results show that the W1L classroom is relatively formal. Work on Canadian immersion education (Mougeon et al. 2010) has shown the formal nature of education to restrict the students' use of more casual variants. More work could explore this possibility in the Welsh context.
- Further research is needed to improve our understanding of variation existing in W1L classroom settings (not explored in detail in the current research), where community usage of Welsh varies, which could point to differences in variation.
- Though a correlation was found between teachers' and students' reported sociolinguistic variation, further work could explore other external factors (i.e. home language of students, social networks, etc.) which can contribute to their acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.

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