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## Home-grown foreign language anxiety: Experiences of Welsh university students studying through the medium of English

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### **Abstract**

University students studying in a language other than their first face significant barriers that can detrimentally impact their wellbeing and academic performance. The relationship between language, confidence and performance has been examined in a wide range of national and cultural contexts. However, little research has focused on the experience of Welsh-medium educated students studying in English at the university level. The goal of our study was to compare how Welsh students who completed their primary and secondary education in Welsh perceived their undergraduate university experience to those who completed their formative schooling in English. Using online and in-person questionnaires, we surveyed 125 Welsh undergraduate students studying at a Welsh university on their academic background, and three core areas of their university experience: attendance, contribution and satisfaction. Results indicate that course attendance and grade satisfaction are not statistically significantly associated with language. However, there was a statistically significant relationship between language of secondary education and student's contribution to lectures and seminars. Students educated primarily in Welsh were less likely to contribute to discussions than their first language English counterparts – a common outcome of foreign language anxiety. Although this lack of comfort and confidence did not appear to impact grade satisfaction, it may be related to, and lead to, further barriers and challenges regarding mental health, academic performance, and post-graduation prospects. The foreign language anxiety experienced by Welsh-medium educated students merits attention considering the cultural importance of the Welsh language, and its status as an official language of Wales. More support is needed for Welsh students studying not only in Welsh, but in English as well. Further research to explore the breadth and depth of the barriers faced by Welsh-medium educated students in English courses at Welsh and English universities could provide important insight and help create policies and initiatives to improve study conditions for Welsh-medium educated students.

## Introduction

Anxiety is often a major obstacle when speaking a foreign language (Horwitz, et al. 1986). Kunt and Tm (2010) define foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety unique to the foreign language classroom. The effects of anxiety on foreign language learning has been a key area of research since the 1970s and has been a central theme within research on bilingual and multilingual students (Arnaiz and Guilln, 2013). Consequences of foreign language anxiety include negative impacts on students' willingness to communicate and their self-esteem (Wu and Lin, 2014; Zare and Riasati, 2012). Although extensive research has explored the implications of learning a new language, research focused on native students experiencing foreign language anxiety at university has only recently emerged within the discourse. The emergence of this sub-topic coincides with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) programmes increasing in European universities to attract international students and staff (Dafouz, et al. 2014; Goodman, 2014). These programmes have resulted in an increasing number of studies focused on the relationship between native language, language of instruction and students' academic success at university (Vander Beken, et al., 2018; Dafouz and Camacho-Miano, 2016; Dafouz, et al. 2014; Civan and Cokun, 2016). However, the research thus far has focused predominantly on academic outcomes and memory. Our work examining the Welsh context builds upon and extends the scope of this research, by asking: do Welsh-medium educated students experience foreign language anxiety in their own country? Although arguably synonymous in this context, throughout this article we refer to the language anxiety experienced by Welsh-medium educated students as second language anxiety, rather than foreign language, as English and Welsh are both official languages of Wales.

There are ten universities in Wales, and over half of the students attending these universities are Welsh (Welsh Government, 2018c). As the Welsh Government are trying to increase the number of students receiving a Welsh education, the potential for second language anxiety is rising. The Welsh Government is aiming to increase the proportion of each school year group receiving Welsh-medium education from 22% to 40% by 2050 and to have one million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017). The Welsh Government's report on Welsh Language in Higher Education (Welsh Government, 2018a), found that 15% of university students from Wales spoke fluent Welsh and a further 15% were Welsh

speakers. The report stated that 6,870 students had some teaching through the medium of Welsh at university, with this set to increase if the Welsh language targets are met. That being said, the majority of Welsh students enrol in university programmes which are taught in English (Welsh Government, 2018b). Therefore, considering the sizeable cohort of students with Welsh language backgrounds and the importance placed on not only maintaining, but developing Welsh language skills by the Welsh government, a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Welsh speaking students in English language programmes is needed. Policies and programmes designed to encourage the development of the Welsh language need to ensure that students studying in English have the academic and social skills to succeed. In order to explore the balance of Welsh student experience in English language programmes, we focussed on three distinct but related research questions: Does grade satisfaction vary between students who completed their formal education in Welsh to English? Does student's confidence in speaking in lectures and seminars? And, does seminar and lecture attendance differ between the two groups?

To address the question of language medium and university experience, we administered a questionnaire among 125 Welsh students from a Welsh university. The questionnaire was open to both English and Welsh speakers so that experiences could be compared using descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The objectives were to see whether there is a significant difference between formal education language medium and attendance to seminars and lectures and likelihood and ability to contribute in lectures and seminars. Further objectives were to see if formal education language medium influences confidence in completing assignments and grade satisfaction, and whether students are frequently marked down for grammatical errors. Results of the tests are presented with a discussion exploring the role of language medium at the chosen Welsh university.

### **Foreign language learning and anxiety**

There are several benefits of implementing English as a medium of instruction at university. Teachers and students have found that teaching and learning in English is a worthwhile opportunity (Goodmann 2014; Macaro and Akincioglu, 2018). Kang's (2012) study on the impacts of the introduction of

English-only study in Korean Universities found that combining first and second language into teaching helped to improve students' course content understanding and further developed their second language and literacy skills. Similarly, Tong and Shi (2012) found that there was a positive attitude towards Chinese-English bilingual education at Universities throughout South-West China.

However, the use of English as a medium of instruction can result in foreign language learning anxiety and has a range of impacts on students worldwide. Aydin et al. (2018) found that in Turkish schools, examinations, grammar-based language activities, unpreparedness before speaking, fear of making mistakes, unfamiliar topics, negative evaluation by other students and fear of failing are sources of foreign language anxiety among children. At university, students' level of familiarity with those they are speaking to has been found to influence anxiety levels (Shirvan and Talebzadeh, 2017; Effiong, 2016). Students with language anxiety may also experience reading anxiety (Wu, 2011). Zhao et al. (2013) found that foreign language reading anxiety may be caused by unfamiliar scripts, unfamiliar topics, and worry about comprehension. In contrast, Iranian English foreign language students, who use English writing in academic programmes, have most anxiety in relation to evaluation and confidence in writing which stems from weaknesses in past education, a lack of confidence and concern for the teacher's evaluations (Olanezhad, 2015). Horwitz's (1986) foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) measures the anxiety that English learners experience (Mohammadi, et al., 2013). FLCAS was used with Chinese English foreign language learners and some of the factors found were: speech anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, uncomfortableness when speaking with native speakers, negative attitudes towards the English classroom and negative self-evaluation (Mak, 2011).

Studies in Europe have found varying results on educational performance due to studying in a second language. In Spain, it has been found that language of instruction does not compromise the learning of academic content and that English-medium instruction does not lower student's final academic outcomes (Dafouz, et al. 2014; Dafouz and Camacho-Miñano, 2016). Adding to this, Vander Beken et al. (2018) established, in Belgium, that when studying texts in a second language, there was no

disadvantage in long-term recognition memory. However, Civan and Coşkun's (2016) results on the effects of the medium of instruction language showed that instruction in the non-native language can have negative impacts on the academic success of students. Within a wider global context, there have been numerous studies on the impact of studying in a second language. It is widely stated that despite the vast number of English learners in China, many have experienced foreign language anxiety when speaking in English, and it has been linked to unsatisfactory learning achievements (He, 2017; He, 2013). Likewise, language anxiety has been found to affect learners' performance in learning in multilingual classrooms in Africa (Madonsela, 2015). A study by Holland (1960), on Spanish speaking students in the USA, argues that the level of achievement in Spanish speaking children is lower than that of English speaking children. Different issues are addressed by Storch (2009), whose study on the impact of studying in a second language in Australia found that, after a semester of studying, although there was some improvement on the formality of learners' language, there was no evidence of improvement in accuracy or complexity.

Anxiety from speaking a foreign language has been found to negatively affect students' willingness to communicate and a negative correlation has been found between language learning anxiety and self-esteem (Wu and Lin, 2014; Zare and Riasati, 2012). Liu (2018) also found that bilingual and multilingual students' willingness to communicate in Chinese was significantly related to and predicted by foreign language anxiety. In a study of English language universities in Turkey, it was even found that intense engagement with a foreign language has the potential to put the native language at risk (Ayçiçeği-Dinn, et al., 2017). As well as having academic consequences, language is linked to students' wellbeing and mental health. Studies of mental health concerns among international university students, have found that the language barrier has been a significant cause of stress and this in turn has negative implications on academic performance (Yeh and Inose, 2003; Mori, 2011).

The extensive literature on the subject clearly shows the complexity and context-dependence of language and learning. While the benefits of a multi-lingual education are apparent, so too are the potential shortcomings. The complexity reflects the inherent multifaceted nature of the topic, which

extends well past academic achievement to issues of mental health and even culture and identity. As Bornman et al. (2014, 597) conclude, ‘mother-tongue tuition is important for the wellbeing of groups, the advancement of human rights and fostering feelings of identity and belonging’. Due to the tumultuous history of Wales and the Welsh language, the link between language and wellbeing is especially strong. In fact, the fundamental importance of the Welsh language to a successful and vibrant Welsh culture is explicitly stated as one of the seven goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015).

### **The cultural importance of the Welsh language**

Wales has a distinctive identity from England, with the Welsh language aiding in retaining Wales’ unique cultural identity (Dabrowska, 2017; May, 2000). Welsh and English bilingualism was increasingly popular during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Act of Union (1542) replaced Welsh with English in all official domains, thereby further increasing the use of English throughout Wales (May, 2000). The industrial revolution further increased the Anglicisation of Wales, particularly in the South, where an influx of English and Irish people contributed to the dilution of Welsh culture (Dabrowska, 2017). The Welsh language has decreased from 90% of the population being Welsh speaking in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to a low of only 18% of the population in 1991 (May, 2000). Since then, new government policies have been introduced in an effort to increase the use of Welsh language throughout Wales. This included the Welsh Language Act (1993), which gave the Welsh language equal status to English in Wales (May, 2000). Furthermore, cultural celebrations, including the Eisteddfod, celebrate Welsh language and culture annually, and highlight the cultural importance of the Welsh language within Wales. Dabrowska (2017) has argued that without numerous efforts to revive Welsh, the number of Welsh speakers in Wales would have continued to decline.

### **The Welsh language in schools**

Welsh medium education has become important in the revival of the Welsh language, with the most rapid growth of the language being found among 3 to 15 year olds (May, 2000). Wales has a combination of Welsh medium, English medium and Bilingual Schools and, according to a report by

the National Assembly for Wales, 16% of pupils attend Welsh medium schools (Jones, 2016). Welsh Government Policy, however, makes it compulsory for children between the ages of 3 to 16 to be taught Welsh as either a first or second language in any school (Jones, 2016).

Linguistic anthropologists have upheld the significance of bilingualism and second language studying since the establishment of some key works in the 1970s, most notably 'Breaking the Language Barrier' (Grubb, 1974) and 'European Models of Bilingual Education' (Beardsmore, 1993). In his work, Baker (1993) maintains that the recent growth of bilingual education suggests a reversal from Anglicised education and that the decision by native Welsh students to pursue English university degrees denotes that prior bilingual education experiences do not impede student's ability to compete favourably with mono-lingually educated pupils. According to Lewis (2008), ever since 1939, when the first Welsh-medium primary school was opened, Welsh-medium and bilingual education has spread across Wales.

Several studies have examined the role of Welsh language in education. According to Thomas et al. (2012), there are opportunities for children to speak Welsh in primary school but the extent to which they engage in extended conversations is limited. However, Davies and Trystan (2012) state that there are concerns of fewer students learning through the medium of Welsh as they continue into later stages of education. Thomas and Roberts (2011) researched children's use of language inside and outside of the Welsh language classroom and found that English was favoured among students. In 2011, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (National Welsh-Medium College) was established with the aim of expanding the range of Welsh-medium study opportunities at Universities in Wales (Davies and Trystan, 2012).

Welsh-medium provision is one of the Welsh Government's priorities (Welsh Government, 2017). According to the Welsh Assembly Government, one third of students in Wales, who are fluent in Welsh, were studying part of their degree in Welsh. However, only one in fifteen were studying mainly in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2018). Cardiff University, the largest university in Wales, has various Welsh language policies. Under the 2018 Welsh Language Standards, the University promises that 'Welsh must be treated no less favourably than English' (Cardiff University, 2018a). In line with this,



Welsh speaking students are offered access to Welsh speaking tutors, Welsh speaking accommodation and the opportunity to complete examinations and assignments in Welsh. Despite an abundance of research on second languages in higher education, little attention has yet been paid to students who have experienced a shift in their main language of teaching between primary and secondary school and higher education within their own country. Therefore, the study of Welsh students is particularly salient in exploring the influence of schooling language on higher educational experience and begins to assess the consideration and support provided to Welsh-medium educated students within Welsh universities. This research aims to contribute to the field of Welsh language studies and education, and to extend the examination of foreign language anxiety beyond grade achievement by looking at student engagement and experience in a more holistic sense. In doing so, we encourage a deeper understanding of Welsh students' feelings of course engagement and satisfaction.

## **Methods**

In order to examine the perceptions and experiences of Welsh-medium educated students studying in English, we developed a questionnaire and collected responses from students studying at Cardiff University. A pilot study ( $n=25$ ) was first run to ensure the clarity and robustness of the questionnaire and analysis approach. The pilot study participant population was selected using convenience sampling within the sampling frame (i.e. Welsh students at Cardiff University). For the full study, we used a stratified random sampling method to recruit participants. We gained access to subset of Welsh university students through the Welsh Society at Cardiff University (Y Gym Gym). As the Society includes students who received their pre-university education in Welsh as well as students educated in English, it proved an excellent resource for recruiting participants. In total, the full study included 125 participants. The questionnaires were administered face-to-face and online via invitation. When posting the questionnaire online, an explanation of the research was written in both Welsh and English. A Welsh speaker was always available when administering the questionnaire face-to-face, with Welsh speakers able to reply in their preferred language. For both the online and face-to-face questionnaires there was a comments section at the bottom of the questionnaire, where participants could leave concluding remarks in either English or Welsh. Although this sample does not fully represent the wider population

of Welsh students studying at English-language universities, our sample is large and robust enough to provide considerable insight into the Welsh university student experience.

Our questionnaire was comprised of 15 questions organized into three sections, each section relating to one of our three research questions. The questionnaire commenced with general questions about the participant, including the language in which they completed their formal education, in order to stratify responses according to language. We then asked questions on course attendance, course contribution and grade satisfaction. All questions were framed as statements allowing for Likert Scale responses. A five-point Likert Scale (1 strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 neutral, 4 disagree, 5 strongly disagree) was used for all questions. Descriptive and inferential statistics, specifically a series of t-tests, were used to analyse the responses.

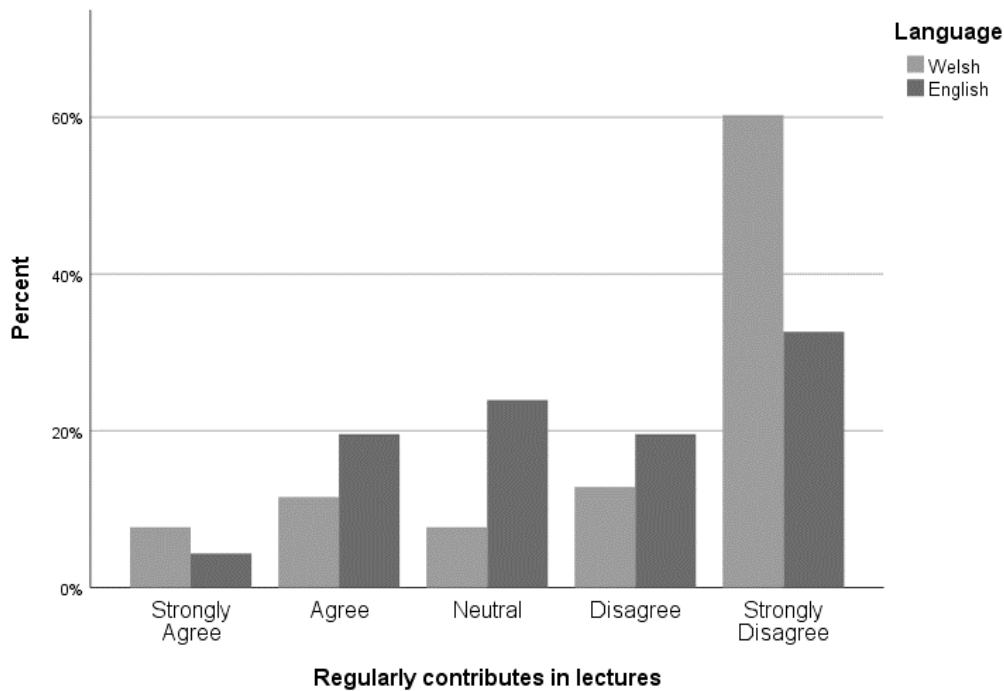
## **Results**

In order to examine any differences between Welsh language and English language university students' attendance, course contribution and grade satisfaction, a series of t-tests were performed on the Likert Scale responses of the 125 participants. Table 1 details the mean response from Welsh and English language students to each of the key areas examined. The mean differences between the Welsh and English language students, as well as the p-values of the t-tests, are also included in the table. Significant results are reported in bold.

**Table 1: Likert Scale mean, mean difference and t-tests comparing Welsh and English language students' attendance, course contribution and grade satisfaction.**

	Mean		Mean Difference	P-value
	Welsh	English		
Seminar attendance	0.83	0.74	-0.094	0.687
Lecture attendance	0.56	0.59	0.023	0.684
Regularly contributes in seminars	2.81	2.54	0.264	0.278
<b>Regularly contributes in lectures</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>3.57</b>	<b>0.499</b>	<b>0.045</b>
<b>Ability to contribute in seminars</b>	<b>1.41</b>	<b>0.80</b>	<b>-0.606</b>	<b>0.020</b>
<b>Confidence to contribute in seminars</b>	<b>1.58</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>-0.729</b>	<b>0.009</b>
Confidence in doing assignments	2.71	2.28	0.423	0.123
Grade satisfaction	2.41	2.41	-0.003	0.989
<b>Confidence with writing</b>	<b>2.51</b>	<b>1.83</b>	<b>0.687</b>	<b>0.006</b>
Lower grades due to grammar	3.46	3.50	-0.038	0.885

Results show that seminar and lecture attendance was high for all students, with no statistically significant difference between the groups. Similarly, there was no significant difference between Welsh and English language students with regards to contributing in seminars, confidence in doing assignments, grade satisfaction, or lower grades due to grammar. The average response for both groups of students in all four of these categories was close to neutral (3 on the Likert Scale). However, there were several statistically significant differences between the Welsh language and English language students. We found that Welsh language students were less likely to contribute in lectures. They also reported feeling less able and confident in contributing in seminars. In addition to the differences between groups regarding oral contributions, we also found that the Welsh language students were less confident in their writing skills than their English counterparts.



**Figure 1: Summary of Welsh and English language student Likert Scale responses regarding how regularly they contribute to lectures.**

It is important to note that although our findings show issues of relative confidence, on average the Welsh language students still reported positive responses regarding their ability and confidence to contribute to seminars (average scores of ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’). Only their ability to regularly contribute in lectures was particularly low. Figure 1 shows the full distribution of both English and Welsh language student responses to the frequency of their contributions in lectures. It clearly shows that Welsh language students differ considerably from their English language counterparts. Over half (60%) of the Welsh language students strongly disagreed with the statement that they regularly contribute in lectures, whereas only one third of English language students strongly disagreed. While the proportion of Welsh language students strongly disagreeing with the statement outnumbered the English language students, the reverse was true at the other end of the spectrum. 8% of Welsh language students and only 4% of English language students strongly agreed with the statement of contributing regularly in lectures. This shows the heterogeneity of the students and the need for additional in depth, qualitative analysis. And despite the positives of a few Welsh language students, it is important to emphasize that

the results reflect the fact that the Welsh language students are working with, competing with, and being measured alongside their English language counterparts, and therefore are potentially at a disadvantage.

## **Discussion**

The results exhibit that for grade satisfaction, seminar and lecture attendance, contribution to seminars and confidence in doing assignments, there is not a statistically significant difference between students who completed their education in English or Welsh prior to studying at university. Cardiff University offers various means of support for Welsh speaking students. This includes offering a Welsh speaking Personal Tutor, the right to complete assessments through the medium of Welsh, and a commitment to promote the Welsh language amongst its staff student body (Cardiff University, 2018b). The resources provided by the university, and the Welsh language being presented equally to the English, as stated within the Welsh Language Act (1993) could be provide an explanation as to why there is not a statistically significant difference between students in terms of their grades and attendance. Similarly, Baker's (1993) study contends that educational language does not influence university experience. These results may contradict previous studies which suggest that foreign language anxiety has a negative effect on academic success (Civan and Coşkun, 2016). Despite this, it is important to note that Welsh and English have equal status as languages in Wales (May, 2000). Due to this, English, while it may be a second language to many Welsh speaking students, is not a foreign language in Wales. Providing a possible explanation as to why these results do not mirror those of studies on foreign language anxiety.

On the other hand, Table 1 shows a statistically significant difference between the Welsh language and English language students regarding contribution in lectures, their ability to and confidence in contributing in seminars and confidence in writing skills. This suggests that although attendance is not an issue, once students arrive to lectures there are potential complications. Jones (2007) has offered the solution of working in groups to prevent anxiety. She contends that although students may feel nervous and initially make mistakes when speaking in English, in group work they talk more and learn from each other, enjoying the use of English in a meaningful, realistic way. In UK universities, group work

often occurs in seminars. Our results show a complicated experience for Welsh language speakers in seminars. While they contribute just as often, on average, as their English language counterparts, they do not feel as able or as confident. So, while group work or other interactive teaching techniques may help Welsh language speakers in contributing, it may not be effectively addressing language anxiety.

Class size may also be a factor and could play a key role in the applicability and effectiveness of Jones' (2007) recommendations. Neer and Kircher (1990) found that speaking before the whole class can create more anxiety than speaking to half of it. The Welsh language students' experience of contributing in lectures also links to studies on foreign language anxiety and the associated unwillingness to communicate (Wu and Lin, 2014; Zare and Riasati, 2012). However, language anxiety may not be the only factor which hinders confidence when contributing. Liu and Littlewood (1997) state that, in China, many have low confidence due to the inability to plan before speaking. Despite this theory, they also link their study back to the unease of speaking in English and the criticism they may receive. In contrast, Fritschner (2000) states that some students feel their role is to passively listen to lecturers, who are the experts, and take notes rather than contributing. Neer and Kircher (1990) also suggest that discussing personal experiences can produce less anxiety than evidence speech. Although there may be a myriad of factors that contribute to speaking anxiety, the abundance of academic literature and findings presented within this paper suggests that language anxiety can play an important role in students' ability, willingness and confidence to contribute to lectures and seminars.

Further results presented from Table 1 indicate that Welsh language students have less confidence in their writing than their English language counterparts. This has parallels with other research that displays connections between language anxiety and writing skills (Olanezhad, 2015). Aydin et al. (2018) found that grammar-based language activities cause anxiety among students, an issue which may translate among students who now study in English instead of Welsh. However, when asked in the questionnaire, Welsh-medium educated students stated that grammar was not an issue. Although grammar is not an explicit concern within this study, other results which show a statistical significance

highlight the potential disadvantage Welsh speaking students face, shedding light on key areas where students may need additional support.

Currently, only one in fifteen Welsh speaking students mainly study in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2018a). At Cardiff University, despite 725 students receiving some teaching in Welsh, and 55 students studying 120 credits through Welsh, 30,875 students have no teaching in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2018b). As most Welsh speaking students study in English, this demonstrates the scope for language anxiety within the learning environment. With a continuing push to increase the use of Welsh from the Welsh Government, the impacts of a change in study at university needs to be understood so that students are fully supported by their higher education institution and so that they can fulfil their potential.

### **Conclusions, recommendations and future research**

Several studies have found that university students studying in a language other than their first face significant barriers to their academic performance. Despite being a bilingual nation, no case studies have focused on the experience of Welsh-medium educated students studying in English at university. Results from this study have found that there is not a statistically significant difference regarding grade satisfaction, attendance, or contributing to seminars amongst Welsh students who completed their education in English or Welsh, before enrolling at Cardiff University. However, there is a difference in students' confidence writing and in contributing to seminars and lectures. There is a prevalence of mental health problems surrounding university students, creating an at-risk group in society (Stallman, 2011). The implications of language anxiety on wellbeing and mental health are why it is crucial to understand how students are affected and how they can be supported at university (Yeh and Inose, 2003; Mori, 2011). Although our study only concentrated on Welsh students at one university, the results show that language anxiety does influence Welsh students' higher education experience. With the use of the Welsh language set to rise, the potential for language anxiety is increasing. Cardiff University currently offers the right to complete certain work in Welsh and a Welsh speaking Personal Tutor.

However, universities must adapt to an increasing number of Welsh speaking students and provide a less-anxiety inducing space for students.

Previous studies have found that, in terms of reducing foreign language anxiety, when working in a less anxiety-inducing environment, passive speakers can become active speakers and can improve reading comprehension performance (Amorim, 2013; Wu, 2011). Trang et al. (2013) suggest that to minimize the barriers and enhance the opportunities of second language education, teachers should pay more attention to understanding student foreign language anxiety and that management should focus on students rather than programmes. Thorough examination of solutions in relation to speaking anxiety for Welsh speakers at universities are needed. Future research could expand the geographic reach of our study and assess the academic experience of other Welsh speaking students in other Welsh universities, to see if other experiences reflect those of students at Cardiff University. Research could also be conducted to review the academic experience of Welsh speaking students attending English universities, which may have a different support system for Welsh speaking students.

Future research could also build directly upon our findings by comparing the actual grades in different course types and settings of English and Welsh speaking students. This would enable a further understanding of whether Welsh speaking students perform as well as their English speaking counterparts and if Welsh speaking students' perceived lack of confidence affects their assignment outcomes at university. Furthermore, although participants could include comments in English or Welsh in our questionnaire, future research conducting semi-structured interviews could help discover deeper insight into the Welsh language student experience, including which language issues are most important to Welsh students.



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