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## **New Curriculum, New Languages Education? How International Languages Education is Changing in Wales**

*Curriculum for Wales: a radical resetting of languages education in the Welsh education system 3-16.*

[The Curriculum for Wales](#) is a brand-new learner-centred curriculum for state-maintained schools in Wales. It is currently being rolled out across Wales, with all schools due to adopt the new curriculum to age 16 [by 2027](#). This learner-centred curriculum deviates from traditional 'prescriptive' national curricula. It is instead underpinned by a co-creation process undertaken with teachers, academics and civil servants. This led to a set of design principles and descriptors, mapped across a range of progression steps. This new approach to curriculum design positions teachers as curriculum makers, skilled to deliver a curriculum for their specific learners and school context. For languages, this curriculum introduces the teaching of languages in addition to English and Welsh (Cymraeg) from the primary phase, a first in the history of Welsh education.

*What does this mean for languages?*

Under the Curriculum for Wales, languages other than English and Cymraeg, are no longer termed modern foreign languages (MFLs) but instead, International Languages. This marks a significant shift for curriculum development. It encourages teachers/schools to look broadly across a range of languages - world languages, BSL, Classical and Ancient Languages and Home, Heritage, and Community languages - as part of the language education 'offer' for their learners. This shift has led to deep thinking about how to deliver International Languages in an already bilingual context where – paradoxically – the learning of International Languages has [the lowest level of uptake at GCSE and A level in the UK](#). According to [StatsWales data](#), in 2024, only 10.34% of all Welsh learners sat a GCSE qualification in a language other than English or Welsh. With Welsh a compulsory subject from ages 3-16, and with a quarter of all Welsh secondary schools either bilingual or Welsh-medium, a bilingual environment would seem intuitively to support a multilingual mindset. However, [this appears not to be the case](#). So, what can we do to support the changing context for languages education in Wales? How can we promote the learning of multiple languages more effectively to learners? Our opinion is to:

- *'Bed in' International Languages learning as early as possible, offering exposure to a range of languages and language learning experiences.* The Curriculum for Wales mandates the introduction of International Languages learning in Year 5 (ages 9-10). This is likely to remain a key policy initiative promoted by the Welsh Government's '[Global Futures](#)' languages strategy, active since 2015. There is good evidence ([see Graham et al 2020](#); Graham and Porter, this collection) that creativity-driven language pedagogy reaps benefits, whilst large scale data from the [MFL Mentoring Project](#) shows that learners in secondary schools have significant appetite to learn languages other than those offered in school. We explore this in a forthcoming article in the *Wales Journal of Education* (Gorrara and Jenkins forthcoming). To facilitate this, the Welsh Government must continue at pace, and with adequate resource (which is a real challenge in the current economic climate), to upskill the primary teacher workforce to develop their confidence to deliver a multilingual language learning experience. An effective transition of this experience into the secondary sector, will be vital, although there is, as in England, significant difficulty in the practicality of connecting the languages taught in feeder primary school to those taught in local secondary schools.

- *Leverage connections between languages.* One of the benefits of the new curriculum is the bringing together of English, Welsh and International Languages into one of six Areas of Learning and Experience: [Languages, Literacy and Communication](#). To capitalise on this, the curriculum would require cross-linguistic and collaborative working, between and across languages. However, [early research](#) on the implementation of International Languages education as part of the Curriculum for Wales reveals that there are distinct cultures of language learning that make collaborative working difficult. For example, English teachers do not see themselves as ‘language teachers’, differentiating themselves from the pedagogies and approaches used by Welsh and International Languages teachers. These findings are supported by fieldwork [research conducted by Sian Brooks in 2023](#). Likewise, [research by the MFL Mentoring Project](#) shows significant divergence in enjoyment of the 3 subject areas from a learner perspective in Wales: English is highly enjoyed, Welsh is the least enjoyed and International Languages feature amongst the three least enjoyed subjects. We need to bridge languages, giving all ‘language teachers’, including teachers of English, the tools and confidence to grasp the positives of a multilingual mindset. More broadly, [Welsh Government-sponsored research](#) shows that schools have prioritised Welsh over International Languages in designing their new curricula – a possible throw-back to the prior ‘bilingual plus 1’ strategy of the Welsh Government. This is having knock-on capacity issues for the primary sector.

*What is the future for language learning within a learner-centred curriculum in Wales?*

Wales can learn from Scotland, a country 10 years ahead of Wales in their curriculum reform journey. Their recent reforms have similar ambitions for the teaching of languages. Yet, despite extensive investment (now ended), [Scotland’s 1+ 2 strategy has had limited success](#) in securing the future of languages learning. So, how can we ensure that International Languages thrive in Wales as part of our own curriculum reforms?

- Partnership is key to securing pathways for continued language learning: we must nurture partnership across sectors and institutions; encourage dialogue and co-creation to ensure that the ‘languages ecosystem’ is coherent, consistent and connected.
- Keep languages on the agenda: languages are the only academic subject specifically mentioned in the Welsh Government’s [Programme for Government](#), 2021-2026. It must remain high on the agenda for a new administration from 2025 with Senedd elections. This requires active engagement, advocacy and promotion across stakeholder groupings.
- Review what works (avoid reinventing the wheel): retaining and sharing learnings from past initiatives, such as ‘triple literacy’ measures (English, Welsh and Modern Foreign Languages), as well as developing innovative new approaches, will ensure a positive blend of previous success stories coupled with new developments ([see Elin Arfon’s report on plurilingual approaches to language learning](#) in Wales).
- Keep motivated: the challenges for languages education across the UK are profound and can feel insurmountable. We note the most recent [threat to languages degrees at Cardiff University](#). Mobilising networks and moving from advocacy to activism for languages – i.e. proactive lobbying of key policy stakeholders and opinion-formers - in Wales remains a top priority.

Further reading

Gorrara, Claire and Lucy Jenkins (forthcoming). 'Languages Connect Us: An Investigation into Learner Perspectives on International Languages in Secondary Schools in Wales', *Wales Journal of Education*, May 2025.