

## HOW THE ENTRANCE OF WELSH IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM HAS FAVOURED ITS NORMALISATION

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The 20th century was a period of great transformation for the Welsh language. Between 1931 and 1991 the number of Welsh speakers fell from 909,300 (36.8% of the total population of Wales) to 500,000 (18.5%).

Table 1: Welsh Speakers in Wales

| Year | Thousands | % of Total Population |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1921 | 922,1     | 37.1                  |
| 1931 | 909,3     | 36.8                  |
| 1951 | 714,7     | 28.9                  |
| 1961 | 656,0     | 26.0                  |
| 1971 | 542,4     | 20.8                  |
| 1981 | 508,2     | 18.9                  |
| 1991 | 500,0     | 18.5                  |

Source: Office for National Statistics and the National Assembly for Wales

Prior to the Welsh Language Act of 1967, the language had no official status in Wales, and was mainly the language of family life and religion. Welsh was not present in public administration and had a minimal role in education. By the end of the 20th century, the process of normalisation, (promoting the use of the language and aiding its recuperation in all sectors and activities of society) had significantly changed the situation of the Welsh language. Education was the first field in which Welsh was allowed to flourish.

The provision of Welsh language education in Wales was until recently a very haphazard affair, depending largely on the number of Welsh speakers in any given class, on the teacher's wish to teach in Welsh or not and also on the educational policy of the local education council.

With regards to pre-school education, the Welsh medium nursery schools have existed since the 1940's. In 1971 an important step was taken with the creation of Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin (Nursery Schools Association). It was created in order to provide Welsh language education for children under 5 (both Welsh mother tongue speakers and monoglot English children), and in 1971 ran 68 schools. By 1998 there were nearly 600 schools. The movement has played a key role in the expansion of teaching in Welsh in primary schools. As more pupils arrive at primary schools from MYM schools, the need for education through the medium of Welsh has increased.

The first Welsh medium primary school was opened in Llanelli in mid Wales in 1947. This was a significant step for education through the medium of Welsh in areas where English was the language of the majority of the population. In the heartlands of Welsh, English had been the medium of education in most primary schools, but as the attitude towards Welsh improved, the presence of the language increased in these schools. Many other local education authorities followed the example of Carmarthenshire and in the next few years a dozen other Welsh medium primary schools were opened.

Increasing immigration from England has been met by local demands to transform some schools in majority Welsh speaking areas as designated Welsh medium. Today, there are Welsh medium primary schools in each county in Wales, teaching through the medium of Welsh to native speakers and non native speakers alike. By the year 2000, 27% of primary schools in Wales were using Welsh as the only or main medium of instruction, while in 67.5% of schools it was only taught as a second language. There is hardly a primary school in Wales where Welsh is not taught at all. Table 2 shows the increase in Welsh speaking primary age children since 1990:

Table 2: Welsh teaching in primary schools

| Percentage of Pupils in classes where Welsh is:         | 1990 | 1993 | 1996 | 2000 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| the sole or main medium of instruction                  | 14.1 | 16.4 | 17.2 | 17.9 |
| used as a medium of teaching for part of the curriculum | 7.7  | 4.2  | 2.6  | 2.4  |
| taught as a second language                             | 55.4 | 67.5 | 75.2 | 78.1 |
| no Welsh is taught                                      | 22.8 | 11.9 | 5.0  | 1.6  |

Source: Education, Training and Economic Statistics Unit of the Welsh Assembly

Before 1956, Welsh had not been used as a language of instruction in secondary schools. From an educational point of view, it was treated as a foreign language. Even in rural Anglesey in the 1950's pupils had to choose between studying Welsh or French. The opening of Ysgol Maes Garmon (in the north east) in 1956 paved the way for other Welsh medium schools and by the mid 1980's there were fifteen state run Welsh medium secondary schools in Wales. In the more Welsh areas (notably Gwynedd and Dyfed), secondary school education was bilingual, the sciences, maths and modern languages were often taught in English while Welsh literature, geography and history were often taught in Welsh. During the late 1980's, more subjects began to be offered through the medium of Welsh. Since 1999, all secondary schools in Wales are obliged to offer the teaching of Welsh as a second language to all under 16's. Table 3 shows the increase in the teaching of Welsh in secondary schools.

Table 3: Welsh teaching in secondary schools in year groups 7 to 11

| Percentage of pupils:             | 1990 | 1993 | 1996 | 2000 |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Taught Welsh as a first language  | 11.7 | 12.1 | 12.6 | 14.0 |
| Taught Welsh as a second language | 49.5 | 66.3 | 65.0 | 84.5 |
| Not taught Welsh at all           | 38.8 | 21.6 | 22.4 | 1.4  |

Source: Education, Training and Economic Statistics Unit of the Welsh Assembly

The increase in Welsh language provision in education has greatly affected the number of Welsh speakers in the younger age groups as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Percentage of persons able to speak Welsh by age group, 1997

| Age group | 3-15 | 16-44 | 45-64 | 65+  |
|-----------|------|-------|-------|------|
| % Wales   | 29,5 | 17,2  | 17,6  | 22,3 |

Source: 1997 Welsh Household Interview Survey

Welsh language education has contributed to the normalisation of the language by giving it intellectual and social status but has also meant that the younger Welsh speakers are able to take advantage of the provisions available in Welsh. For many of the older generation, Welsh is a language to be spoken, this is a direct consequence of the lack of Welsh language education in the past. The older generation of Welsh speakers having been educated through the medium of English, generally prefer reading and writing through the medium of English and have been less demanding for bilingualism in the public and private sectors.

In order for the benefits of Welsh language education to be reaped, speakers must be able to make full use of the language outside of the educational sphere. The progress made in language rights and status during the latter half of the 20th century can be largely attributed to the pressure group *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society), without forgetting of course, government cooperation. The first Welsh language act in 1967 gave the right to use Welsh in court, and also authorized its use in public administration. The establishment of Radio Cymru (the Welsh language radio station) in 1977 and the Welsh language television channel (S4C) in 1982 contributed further to the normalisation of Welsh.

The most significant language legislation to date is the Welsh Language Act of 1993, which gives Welsh a greater degree of equality with English: “so far as is both appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable, to the principle that in the conduct of public business and the administration of justice in Wales the English and Welsh languages should be treated on a basis of equality.” This Act does not however,

include any necessity on the private sector to provide bilingual services. In order to attain full normalisation for the Welsh language, a new language Act giving Welsh exactly the same standing as English needs to be established.

The biggest threat facing the Welsh language today is in-migration from England. The fact that the children of non-Welsh speaking parents (migrants and otherwise) will learn Welsh in school is a positive aspect. However, in order for Welsh to survive, those children must continue to speak Welsh into their adult life. In order to protect and promote the Welsh language, a commitment must be made by the government, both politically and financially. However, the Welsh Assembly is ignoring the in-migration issue and invested only 0.7% of its 2001-02 budget to “Culture, Sports and the Welsh Language”.

The normalisation of Welsh may seem to be progressing well but there are fewer speakers to enjoy the advantages available to Welsh speakers today. There is a continuous drop in the number of Welsh speakers (as seen in Table 1) despite the progress made on the normalisation of the language and the strong presence of the language in education.