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How deep is your immersion? Policy and practice in Welsh-medium preschools with children from different language backgrounds

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A challenge noted in a number of endangered language contexts is the need to mix L2 learners of the target language with first language speakers of that language in a less planned way than is found in the two-way immersion approach. Such mixing of L1 speakers of the target language with L2 learners arises from the difficulty of making separate provision for the dwindling L1 minority. The issue of how to manage the range of language proficiency in such mixed groups is relevant to a number of language contexts. This paper explores data gathered in Wales from educators in Welsh-medium preschool nursery groups (*cylchoedd meithrin*). Particular attention is given to issues relating to the grouping of Welsh L1 and L2 children and to policies and practices pertaining to the teaching and learning of Welsh in these groups. Survey data were collected from 162 *cylchoedd* Leaders in areas where such mixing of L1 speakers and L2 learners regularly occurs. The Leaders' skills, attitudes and approaches to developing the language of the children in such mixed groups are examined, as well as the issues of differentiated input and pedagogical adaptation to address those needs, in an exploration of how policy and practice can diverge in dealing with this challenge. The study aims to develop a fuller understanding of the needs of these early immersion Leaders, in order to support them and maximise their effectiveness, by recognising that they are striving, not only to promote language maintenance/enrichment in L1 minority language speakers and L2 acquisition among L2 learners, but also to provide high quality early years' education,.

Keywords: Welsh, minority language immersion, translation, translanguaging

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Introduction to Welsh immersion

Modern Welsh-medium education in Wales is regarded as having commenced in 1939 with the opening of an independent Welsh-medium primary school established by Welsh-speaking parents in Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, initially for just seven pupils (Williams, 2002, 2003; Baker, 2010). Whereas the first Welsh-medium schools (or *ysgolion Cymraeg*) were established with the main aim of providing children from Welsh-speaking homes with education in their first language, today the situation in these schools varies significantly depending on the region of Wales in which they are located (Lewis, 2008). Classes in schools across Wales frequently include children with diverse language backgrounds, with the consequence that Welsh-medium education today means different things to different cohorts of children (see Welsh Assembly Government 2006). For 7.6% of the pupil population in Welsh primary schools, Welsh-medium education is *heritage or maintenance language education* or *community language education*. For almost every child in predominantly English-speaking areas, Welsh-medium education is immersion education, while in the more traditionally Welsh-speaking areas, it is a mixture of maintenance language education and immersion education (Lewis 2008). Redknap (2006) argues that Welsh-medium education is now characterized by provision in the same classroom of immersion education for L2 speakers alongside provision for L1 children who speak Welsh at home.

The 2001 Census results (National Assembly for Wales, 2003) shows the outcome of Welsh-medium education in the numbers of Welsh speakers: 20.8% (approximately 582,000) of the population of Wales (aged 3 and above) reported that they could speak at least some Welsh, 16.3% (about 458,000) could understand, speak, read and write Welsh (i.e. have the full range of skills), while 4.9% (about 138,000) could understand spoken Welsh only. Significantly, as a result of Welsh-medium

education, it was amongst 5-15 year old children that the highest percentage of Welsh speakers was found, namely 40.8% (Lewis 2006, 2008).

Welsh-medium pre-schooling in particular has proven to be popular. Welsh-medium playgroups (*Cylchoedd Meithrin*) seek to promote the education and development of children under five through the medium of the Welsh language. The body which organises these preschools is *Mudiad Meithrin*, and its aims are “to give every young child in Wales the opportunity to benefit from early years services and experiences through the medium of Welsh” (*Mudiad Meithrin*, n.d.). *Mudiad Meithrin* currently has 981 units throughout Wales composed of 578 preschool groups (*Cylchoedd Meithrin*), as well as 403 *Ti a Fi* parent-and-toddler groups.

A notable feature of the Welsh sociolinguistic context is its diversity, and Welsh-medium pre-schools may include pupils from Welsh-speaking homes alongside pupils with some knowledge of the language, together with pupils from homes where no Welsh is spoken and from homes where a language other than Welsh or English is spoken. An evaluation of achievement in these Welsh-medium pre-schools by Roberts and Baker (2002) showed that children make considerable progress across a wide range of Welsh language skills, noting that their progress in (a) listening and understanding, (b) speaking and communication and in (c) early literacy skills was very marked. While they noted that children from English-medium homes made impressive progress in Welsh language acquisition, less is known about the progress in language skills among children from Welsh-only or Welsh and English speaking homes.

Children leaving a Welsh-medium preschool are likely to continue on into mixed groups in their primary schools. Statistics published by the Welsh Government (2011) noted that 13.8% of pupils aged 5 years and over in state primary schools can speak Welsh fluently; of these, 7.6% are from Welsh-speaking homes and 6.2% from

homes where no Welsh is spoken. These statistics also showed that a further 24.4% can speak Welsh, but not fluently. This indicates that Welsh-medium education at both pre-school and primary level in twenty-first century Wales embraces children from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This characteristic of contemporary Welsh-medium education was acknowledged in the Welsh Government's Welsh-medium Education Strategy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010: 2.14, see endnote 1¹). It is significant that *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2004-2005* (Estyn, 2006) drew specific attention to this mixing of native speakers with learners in a sociolinguistic context in which the proportion of children who speak Welsh at home is falling, and noted that teachers are having difficulties in modifying their teaching methods in such situations (Estyn 2006: 46). The challenge is summarised thus in the Welsh Assembly Government's consultation document on its Welsh-medium Education Strategy:

The challenge...is to respond appropriately to the changes in the linguistic profile of the children arriving in schools. They need to continue to provide for learners whose main (if not only) language of the home and neighbourhood is Welsh. At the same time, they must ensure that learners whose Welsh is far less secure receive enough Welsh-medium input to enable them to become proficient bilingual speakers. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009: 39)

These challenges are also characteristic of Welsh-medium preschools (*Cylchoedd Meithrin*) across Wales by today, with the intake of children becoming more diverse in respect of their linguistic profile.

An international perspective

A great deal of research has been carried out on the effect of teaching two linguistic cohorts of pupils within the same classes in countries such as Canada, the United States, Catalunya, the Basque Country and Ireland. Lewis (2006) considers the significant international research in the last forty years which has raised a number of important

considerations which are of particular relevance to contemporary Welsh-medium education (e.g., Mougeon and Beniak 1989, 1991, 1994; Long and Porter 1985; Wong Fillmore 1985; 1991a; 1991b; Ramirez and Merino 1990; Watson 1989; Lambert 1990; Lindholm 1990; Landry and Allard 1991; Christian 1996; Arzamedi and Genesee 1997; Baker 1997; Valdés 1997; Hickey 2001, 2007; and Lasagabaster 2002) The first issue concerns the advantages and disadvantages of teaching L1 (minority) pupils and L2 (majority) pupils in the same class; and the implications of this for both cohorts. A related question concerns the optimal balance between the number of L1 and L2 pupils in classes/groups and the principles of grouping pupils within classes.

The opportunities and the challenges presented by teaching both cohorts of children in the same classes were examined in detail by Hickey (2001: 444) with regard to Irish-medium preschools or *naíonraí*. While it would appear advantageous to have native-speaker peers available to interact in the target language with L2 learners in the classroom, Hickey (2007) also showed how easily influenced minority-language-dominant children are to switch to the majority language in this context, which results in unofficial immersion in English for this group. This can pose difficulties for educators trying to support and enrich the L1 language skills of these young native speakers in a situation of high contact with the higher status language. Hickey (2001) also showed that the language needs of L1 speakers of a threatened language can fail to be addressed in such mixed groups if the input is calibrated mainly to suit the L2 learners, with little opportunity to offer more enriched input and elicit more extended output from the native speakers.

There are strong similarities between the problems faced in Irish-medium and Welsh-medium preschools in terms of needing to find a balance between addressing the highly visible language needs of L2 learners, and the less obvious, but equally urgent

needs of L1 minority language children for active language support and enrichment. The future of minority languages depends on maintaining and enriching the language capacity of L1 speakers and strategically promoting its use between L1 and L2 children. This challenge is more complex than the traditional immersion one of attempting to develop L2 proficiency in the minority language among a group of homogeneous L2 learners, especially in situations where the needs of L2 learners' needs are prioritised over L1 speakers'.

Recognition of the differing language needs of young bilingual learners requires recognition of their dynamically emerging bilingualism in Welsh and English, and the international literature on immersion has seen increasing concern (particularly across the researcher-practitioner divide) about the issue of whether the L1 and L2 should be kept separate or not in the classroom. While Lambert and Tucker (1972) saw it as axiomatic that in second language immersion the two languages would be kept rigidly separate (the "two solitudes assumption", as noted in Cummins (2007, 223), a number of researchers (e.g. Cook 2001; Cummins 2007; Cenoz and Gorter, 2011; García 2009; and Lyster, Collins and Ballinger 2009) have argued that today, such separation is misguided in overlooking the artificiality of obstructing contact between a multilingual's languages. It is particularly apposite to consider this issue with regard to a Welsh dataset, since the topic of 'translanguaging' was originated in Wales by Cen Williams (1994) and more recently further developed by Lewis, Jones and Baker (2012). The issue of translanguaging will be discussed below in light of the data from the Leaders of Welsh mixed groups examined here.

To summarise, among the important issues in early Welsh immersion identified (Lewis, 2008) as needing to be explored are: the need to raise awareness of and ensure the achievement of a set of differentiated objectives for different learners; the

maintenance and enrichment of the Welsh of pupils from Welsh speaking homes (Language 1); the development of the Welsh of pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes (Language 2); the facilitation of effective language interaction between Language 1 pupils (from Welsh speaking homes) and Language 2 pupils (from non-Welsh speaking homes) within classes; and the provision of high quality early years' education for all children. The current study seeks to address some of these issues by exploring the situation regarding L1 and L2 children in *Cylchoedd Meithrin*, focusing on attitudes and practices pertaining to the input offered and pedagogy adopted by preschool leaders in Welsh-medium preschools which cater for children from different language backgrounds.

Participants and Method

The data discussed here are drawn from a mixed-methods study of *cylchoedd* in areas of Wales identified as being likely to include both L1 Welsh speakers and L2 Welsh learners (i.e. urban English-dominant areas such as Cardiff were excluded). As a first step in the study, the two researchers spent several days separately observing four *cylchoedd*, selected as offering a range of diversity within the groups. The Leader in each of the groups visited was interviewed by the first author and the observation and interview data were used in the development of the question protocol for a focus group with the Development Officers of *Mudiad Meithrin* and later for a survey of *cylchoedd* Leaders. This focus group was conducted with the twelve Development Officers who were based in areas where mixed groups are found. These officers each supervise a district in which the mean number of *cylchoedd* is 24. They make regular visits to each *cylch* in their district, monitoring standards and providing advice and support, in a role that combines Inspector with line-manager. Following transcription and analysis of the

focus group data, a bilingual questionnaire was developed which drew from the *cylch* observations by the authors, the Leader interviews and the focus group data, as well as from a previous survey with a similar group of Leaders in Ireland (Hickey, 1999). The Welsh-English questionnaire which was developed was used to collect anonymous data from Leaders, eliciting information on demographic issues such as their qualifications, Welsh proficiency and experience, as well as posing both closed and open-ended questions regarding the strategies they used in mixed groups, their approach to L1 speakers in the groups, and their overall teaching strategies. The questionnaire was distributed by the Development Officer of *Mudiad Meithrin* in each case, so that any questions or concerns among the Leaders about the research could be answered and encouragement to complete the questionnaire could be provided. However, Leaders were assured of their anonymity by being given a stamped addressed envelope in which to return the questionnaire directly to the researchers, and by an undertaking that individuals' responses would not be identifiable by anyone in their employer organisation. The survey yielded a response rate of 65%, considered satisfactory for an anonymous postal survey.

In analysing the data from the survey, the quantitative data were analysed statistically using SPSS, while Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the responses to open-ended questions, identifying potential themes and sub-themes. A coding frame was developed, which was informed by the work of Gibbs (2007) and Braun and Clarke (2006), which give clear guidelines with regard to conducting thematic analysis. The first author conferred with an independent researcher experienced in thematic analysis, to evaluate the coding frame which was developed, and as a result, many of the codes and sub-codes were refined to give more mutually exclusive codes, as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006). The final coding frame developed was then used to code the

qualitative data from the participants, and inter-rater reliability analysis was carried out using 10% of the responses to open-ended questions. The inter-rater agreement for the data was carried out by a third researcher experienced in qualitative research: the agreement was 91%, which was deemed very good.

In presenting the results here, it is necessary to focus on a number of findings, specifically on two main areas: the Leaders' pedagogical approach to groups in which L1 speakers of Welsh are mixed with L2 learners, particularly with regard to their language use in these groups, and their practices and attitudes towards the needs of the L1 speakers specifically in such mixed groups. The data discussed here include both the quantitative survey data on background and teaching strategies, and the responses to the open-ended questions, which were analysed using Thematic Analysis. First, it is necessary to outline the demographic characteristics of the Leaders and the preschool groups in which they work. Table 1 presents first some information regarding the mix of home language backgrounds among the children attending each *cylch*, as reported by each survey Leader who participated.

INSERT Table 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows that almost two-fifths (38.5%) of the Leaders who participated in this study taught in groups in which first language (henceforth L1) speakers of Welsh were the dominant group numerically, while 11% were in groups with about equal numbers of L1 speakers of Welsh and L2 learners, and half (50.5%) taught groups in which the L2 learners were the largest group, but about half of these groups had some children from Welsh-speaking homes.

The Welsh proficiency of the sampled Leaders was high, with 74% reporting that they were native speakers and a further 11% indicating that they were fluent L2 speakers of Welsh. The remainder comprised 9% who reported that they were moderate

speakers of Welsh, and 5% who reported beginner levels of proficiency. Leader fluency in the groups with a majority of children from ‘all-Welsh homes’ or those from ‘mainly Welsh homes’ was higher than average, with over 85% of the Leaders in those groups reporting that they were L1 speakers. While the profile of Welsh proficiency among the Leaders was very good, it must be noted that overall a minority (15%) reported moderate or lower levels of Welsh, below that of fluent L2 speaker, and these less proficient speakers were most likely to be found in groups where children from English-speaking homes dominated.

The Leader respondents were asked to report on their Assistants’ Welsh proficiency in addition to their own. The target language proficiency of the 344 Assistants in the surveyed *cylchoedd* is relevant, since the assistants interact with and provide input to the children. This showed a fairly similar distribution to that found among the Leaders themselves: the majority (68%) of these Assistants had native speaker ability and another 10% were fluent L2 speakers, but 7% had only moderate levels of Welsh, and the remaining 14% had only basic levels of Welsh.

Looking at the respondents’ experience as Leaders, over half (59.7%) of those surveyed had over 6 years experience, although only 13% of these had more than 15 years’ experience. This accords with the observations of the Development Officers in the Focus Group study, who reported that many of their personnel work as Leaders for a number of years while their own children are young, and then move on to other work as their family circumstances change. While this offers some stability in the medium-term, it also means a potential loss of expertise in the long term, and the survey showed that it was in the groups where the L1 Welsh speakers were in the majority which were the least likely to have Leaders with long experience.

Pedagogical Approach to Mixed Groups

In order to investigate whether the type of language background mix in the *cylch* group influenced Leaders' priorities, they were asked to rank from most to least important a list of features/activities as they would do if they themselves were assessing a *cylch*. The closed-class options offered to them included features noted by the researchers during observations of *cylchoedd*, as well as factors that the focus group and interview data revealed either as salient or as significant for *cylch* functioning, or which received particular training emphasis and on-going organisational support. The analysis in Table 2 presents the percentages of Leaders in groups with a majority of English speakers and those with a majority of Welsh speakers who ranked each of these aspects in their top three most important things in assessing a *cylch* are presented.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 shows that there was a high level of agreement between the Leaders in the factors or aspects of *cylch* functioning which they ranked most highly, regardless of the type of diversity in their groups. Over 60% of each group of Leaders ranked in their top three '*children at ease and stimulated*', over a half said that they would similarly rank having a '*great diversity of activities*' and '*children busy at all times, independently or with other children*'. It is notable that the factors which were ranked highest by the majority of Leader respondents refer to general early education issues. About half of each group placed a premium on a language-related factor: '*lots of verbal interaction between the children, regardless of language*' but it was notable that this was preferred to an option that specified the target language. Some slight differences did emerge in the proportion of Leaders who gave a high ranking to '*effective planning and use of time*' with 50% of Leaders in groups with mainly Welsh L1 speakers ranking this in their top three, and with slightly fewer Leaders of those in groups with mainly L2 learners (41%)

doing so. As might be expected, there was greater divergence between the Leaders regarding the importance accorded to *'high levels of Welsh use among the children'* with a higher proportion (40%) of those with mainly L1 Welsh speakers ranking this in their top three, and with only 22% of those with mainly L2 learners placing this among the most important things they would look for in assessing a *cylch*. It was also interesting to look at the factors which most Leaders did *not* include in their top three factors: Only a minority of both groups (26% and 29%) placed *'planned progression in Welsh for all children'* among their three most important features of a *cylch*, despite the fact that many of these Leaders had a range from complete beginners to native speakers of Welsh in their groups.

The Leaders were asked a number of closed and open-ended questions regarding how they manage mixed groups of L1 speakers and L2 learners. One issue that was relevant to this concerned their own use of Welsh with children of different levels of Welsh proficiency. They were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed/disagreed with the statement: *I speak only Welsh with all children from the outset* on a scale of 1-7, where 1 represented 'strongly disagree'; and 7 meant 'strongly agree'. In Figure 1, the responses which agreed (points 7-5 on the scale) are grouped, and those which disagreed are also grouped (points 3-1), while neutral represented a score of 4 on this scale.

FIGURE 1 about here

Figure 1 shows that there was some variability among the Leaders with regard to their attitude to speaking only the target language with all of the children from the outset, with those in groups which had the largest proportions of L2 learners showing the highest disagreement of about 35%. Overall, a fifth (21%) of the Leaders disagreed with this statement regarding use of Welsh with all children all the time, constituting

between 10 and 20% of the Leaders in groups that included native speakers as well as learners. This would seem to indicate that even some of the Leaders in groups where L1 speakers of Welsh are in the majority do not only use Welsh at all times with all children in their groups. Further light was thrown on this with their responses to another question, where 49% of all the Leaders said that they based their choice of language on the language background or ability of the individual child they are with at any particular time. Thus, some Leaders reported that their choice of language is influenced by individual children's progress in the course of the year, since almost half (49%) also agreed that they '*switch between the two languages fairly frequently in the first term, but less as we go through the year*'. However, 20% of the Leaders sampled reported that they continue to switch between the two languages fairly frequently right through the year, depending on individual children's proficiency.

The language use by the Leaders in these *cylchoedd* is further elaborated on in their responses to the open-ended questions, which showed a variety in the views expressed. On the one hand this was represented by those who reported adhering to a strong immersion policy of speaking only Welsh, such as:

We are a Welsh language cylch and we have a Welsh language policy. (L:13)
As a cylch the children are immersed in the Welsh language as per policy of MYM (L71)
It's important to speak Welsh to the children all the time. (L:99)

However, some Leaders expressed a somewhat more nuanced or qualified view with regard to total immersion:

I always use Welsh when I can. (L:10)
I tend to talk in Welsh then translate for those who do not understand. (L:12)

At the furthest end of this continuum were views which pointed to a language policy based on individual children's language background as discussed above, rather than a typical immersion policy:

Children are individuals so they must be treated linguistically according to their ability. (L:32)

Each child's language ability is different. (L:67)

Reasons for this more qualified approach to target language use in early immersion were offered in the open-ended responses to related questions, where the data pointed to Leaders' significant *concern for keeping young children happy and ensuring their understanding* at all times:

I like the children to understand me and be comfortable. (L:54)

To make sure the children are happy some things take time. (L:146)

Other comments explained this willingness to depart from use of the target language as based on a perception that this is necessary when a child is upset, which often (but not exclusively) occurs while the child is getting used to the transition from home:

Any child's first language should be used in a stressful or upsetting situation. (L:111)

I speak English to a child when s/he is upset especially during the settling in period and also for toilet requirements to avoid accidents! (L:30).

I speak Welsh all the time, but if a child is upset and crying for their parent I speak English if it's their first language so as to comfort the child. (L:64)

If L2 learners are ill, hurt or unhappy, I take them to one side and speak English. (L:135)

It should be noted that some Leaders emphasized that this concern regarding distressing children by speaking to them in their L2 was **influenced by the children's very young age at entry**, given that these groups can now include some children as young as two or two and a half years of age. Several Leaders commented on how young some of the children in their group are:

*It must be remembered that there are two-year-old children in the *cylch*, so they don't have much of any language (L:35)*

It's necessary to remember that the children start as 2 and a half year olds. (L:120)

In responses to questions exploring pedagogical practices, it was found that some of the Leaders reporting non-exclusive use of Welsh in the *cylch* indicated that they had

developed specific strategies with regard to their use of English. Several reported a time period, a ‘settling in period’ that varied in length between the first week and the first term, during which they speak (some) English to help L2 children to get used to the new setting:

We settle in the children in the home language first, and introduce Welsh after they’ve settled. (L:156)

*Welsh is the language of the *cylch*. For the first week we translate into English so that children from non-Welsh speaking families get an idea of what to do, and then we run the sessions in Welsh only. (L:120)*

I only speak English in the first term and only if the child’s first language is English. (L:146)

While the last quote referred to a limited time period during which English is only spoken to children with limited Welsh, others reported that after the initial period when they used some English, they then moved to **using English in one to one conversations to help a child who has not understood or is upset:**

I speak Welsh all the time. I will only translate or switch back to English if a child has a problem understanding or becomes distressed. (L:130)

Another strategy reported was having the Assistant act as an English translator when deemed necessary for the L2 learners’ comprehension:

The Assistant translates into English quietly to the Welsh L2 learners if they seem not to understand. (L:155)

Thus, there appeared to be a strategy among some Leaders of moving from a time period in which children were offered English translations of Welsh in an effort to make them more comfortable in the *cylch*, to a child-specific strategy to ensure that children had comprehended. It was of interest that some Leaders reported that, while they spoke English in one-to-one situations with individuals if they thought it necessary, they attempted to compensate for this by ensuring that some activities are ‘safe zones’ for Welsh, with exclusive Welsh use in group activities or parts of the daily routine:

Welsh is used in all group work. (L:156)

Parts of the session, e.g. registration, weather, singing, ‘fruit and milk’ are in Welsh only from the very beginning. (L:137)

In these cases, the concern to emphasise and safeguard use of the target language during the group work appeared to point to this strategy being less firmly adhered to with individual children. One Leader's comment was particularly interesting, as she justified using English translation for L2 learners on an on-going basis in order to ensure children understood:

I want the children to understand, so if a child does not understand a word or phrase I'll translate or offer another word for it. Understanding is more important than the language use. (L:24)

Such translation was salient enough in their practice for some Leaders to have developed *an explicit and shared strategy for such translation:*

Welsh is spoken at all times, but if the need arises we always use the Welsh word first, e.g. llaeth, milk, llaeth. (L:75)

I say it in Welsh first, then English. (L:36)

We say the sentence in Welsh then English then Welsh. As term goes on we tend to use more and more Welsh. (L:19)

If I think a child does not understand what I say in Welsh then I will emphasise the sentence by saying it firstly in Welsh, then English, then Welsh again. (L:5)

We have to speak Welsh because of the Mudiad policy set up for us. However, we try to focus on key words during activities and translate and repeat. (L:76)

Welsh learners sometimes need to hear a question in their own language (English) therefore I speak Welsh to them until I recognise that they didn't understand, and then I translate. (L:100)

I speak Welsh all the time, but when I ask an English child a question and he doesn't respond because he doesn't understand, I'll say the question in Welsh again and translate occasional words. (L:112)

It is interesting to note how often Leaders began their responses to these open-ended questions with a comment about speaking Welsh 'at all times' in line with the policy of their organisation, but then went on to qualify this by explaining their use of English with the Welsh L2 learners. However, it should be emphasised that these views fall along a continuum from those who report using an exclusively Welsh policy to a relativist position as portrayed above. It may also be the case that Leaders move along this continuum depending on their experience, observation and training during their careers: it was interesting that one Leader who reported using only Welsh explained that

this was based on her awareness that the children comprehended more than they could say:

The second language Welsh children understand Welsh very quickly although they don't speak it! (L:2)

Another Leader commented on changes in her frequency of translation into English as a result of her experience that it was not required:

Until recently I had used a lot of English...but have now realised it is not necessary so only if absolutely needed now do I use English. (L:40)

However, such comments attesting to a Leader's review of the need to use translation were rare compared to those which appeared to accept the need to offer regular translation for L2 learners, in order to ensure their understanding and comfort.

Taken together, these survey and qualitative data offer insights into the possible gaps which can open between an official policy of immersion in the target language, and the implementation of that policy, when not all staff are fully confident that young children can be happy in an exclusively immersion environment. While it is difficult, and indeed likely to be counterproductive to argue for a strategy that Leaders feel would distress a young L2 learner in the early stages of settling into day-care, it is worth considering whether some of the later translation is in fact necessary or desirable. Another issue relates to the impact that such translation strategies have beyond the children acquiring Welsh as their L2, that is, the Welsh L1 children in these groups, and it is the strategies in relation to the latter that are discussed below.

Pedagogical approach to L1 speakers in mixed groups

Leaders were asked to indicate how they handled the issue of grouping children for different activities. In each type of *cylch* (i.e. with different proportions of L2 learners and L1 speakers), the majority (75-80%) reported that they allowed the children to

choose their partner(s) for particular activities, with some Leaders commenting on the benefits this has for promoting children's social development. However, in reporting on how they managed the occasions when the Leaders managed the grouping, a majority of over 70% in each type of *cylch* said that they 'always' or 'regularly' dispersed the Welsh L1 speakers among the L2 learners as a way of promoting the speaking of Welsh. Similar strategies have been seen in other studies, such as Hickey (2001), where preschool (*naíonra*) Leaders also reported that they mixed the L1 children among the L2 learners in an attempt to increase the use of the target language among them. That study found that such a strategy of dispersal was unsuccessful because it led the minority language speakers to switch to English rather than model the target language to the L2 learners.

Such dispersal of L1 speakers could be balanced by offering opportunities to play with or alongside other L1 children at intervals as a way of facilitating these children's use of the target language together, but this was not seen in Hickey's (2001, 2007) reports. Similarly in the *cylchoedd*, when asked if they sometimes grouped the Welsh L1 speakers together as a way of encouraging them to speak Welsh to each other when an adult was not involved, only a minority of the Leaders in each group type reported that they regularly did so. While this is clearly less relevant for groups with mainly L1 speakers, or those with mainly L2 speakers, it is very relevant for those groups which contain only a small number of Welsh L1 speakers, and in these groups, fewer than 30% of the Leaders reported that they 'always' or 'regularly' grouped the L1 speakers together in this way, with over half (50-60+%) indicating that they 'never' or 'rarely' did this.

Leaders were also asked to indicate if they ever took the Welsh L1 children in pairs or a small group in order to offer them a more linguistically challenging activity,

and if so, how often. Figure 2 shows that in those groups in which the L1 speakers were either in the minority or made up about half the group, less than half of the Leaders in such groups said that they always or regularly took these children for L1 enrichment activities, while between 40% and 50% of the Leaders in those *cylchoedd* reported that they rarely/never took them together with other native speaker peers to offer them more linguistically challenging activities. In the groups where the native speakers formed the largest group, the response that the majority of Leaders did not take them for linguistically challenging activities may mean that they believed that they already received such challenges either as part of the whole group, or in smaller groups, but it is also possible that even these groups are to some extent driven by the ‘lowest common denominator’ as will be discussed later.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

When asked about their language use with the Welsh L1 speakers, 81% of the Leaders overall agreed that they ‘*speak only Welsh with the Welsh first language children when they are on their own*’. However, when these children are with L2 learners in some *cylchoedd* this affects the input they hear, as 65% of the Leaders agreed that ‘*when Welsh first language children are mixed with Welsh learners, I include English words and phrases in order to communicate with the whole group*’. Indeed, three-quarters (75%) of the Leaders in groups where no group predominated agreed with this statement.

Addressing L1 speakers’ needs requires an awareness and recognition that their L1 skills need enrichment, and while this was noted in many of the responses, it was not universally recognised by the Leaders in this study. When asked ‘*do Welsh first language speakers need support and encouragement to develop their Welsh?*’, 78% of the Leaders in groups where the L1 speakers were in the majority agreed, and 70% of

the Leaders in groups with equal L1 and L2 speaker numbers, but only 65% of those with fewer Welsh L1 speakers in their groups agreed, and 12-14% of the Leaders in each group type disagreed (with neutral or missing data making up the remainder). When asked “*do Welsh first language children sometimes lack vocabulary and accuracy in their Welsh?*” only 43% of the Leaders in the groups with mainly/many L2 learners agreed. This is possibly because, when compared to the L2 learners who make up the majority in their groups, the L1 Welsh children seem fluent. Only a little more than half (57%) of the Leaders in groups with mainly/many Welsh L1 children agreed that the first language Welsh speakers need enrichment, whereas a larger proportion of Leaders from groups with a balance between L1 and L2 speakers in their *cylchoedd* agreed (72%) with the need for language enrichment for the minority language L1 children. This could reflect some differences in the Welsh competence of children in strongly Welsh-speaking areas compared to those in more bilingual areas, or differences in the awareness of the Leaders in areas where the language is more under threat. There did appear to be some differences between the Leaders with regard to their recognition of the linguistic needs of the Welsh L1 speakers, and this might benefit from discussion in pre-service and in-service training. Interestingly, a small number of comments in the open-ended survey questions appeared to point to an intriguing assumption on the part of a small number of Leaders: given that language acquisition is a critical part of young children’s development that the *cylch* should therefore aim to develop all children’s first language skills, irrespective of whether that is in English or Welsh, rather than focusing on developing their Welsh either as L2 or as L1:

Naturally children aged 2½ and 3 need to develop vocabulary whether in Welsh or English, and this happens naturally in a cylch meithrin atmosphere. (L:156)
Welsh and English speakers have a lack of vocabulary sometimes. English speakers also need support to develop their language. They are 2½ to 3 years old. (L:33)

Another Leader did show a more definite orientation to developing children’s Welsh,

but when asked how she supported the Welsh L1 children's language development it was notable that she was not comfortable in commenting on this group separately from the L2 learners:

I think all children need support and encouragement to develop their Welsh, not just Welsh first language speakers.(L:109)

It appeared significant that this comment was appended to the end of the question on supporting Welsh L1 speakers, but not after the previous question on supporting Welsh L2 learners, which might indicate some ambivalence about grouping Welsh L1 children based on language level. Such reservations about grouping by language level had also been expressed in the focus group data with the Development Officers. Therefore, it is relevant to include here a brief examination of the data on this topic from the twelve Development Officers also, since they offer a perspective across the variety of *cylchoedd* in their catchment areas, and have observed a range of practices over a number of years. The data from the Development Officers which related to the theme of L1 speakers' need for enrichment are briefly presented here as throwing light on their awareness that the L1 children have particular needs in the *cylch*. Their comments reflected a concern that the Welsh L1 children were not being offered sufficient language enrichment.

They [Welsh L1 speakers] are not being stretched in my view.(T5:18)
If you look at the reading corner and the storybooks for the Welsh [L1] children, a lot of the books are very sort of simple really, possibly they could benefit from more challenging books and story time." (T5:19)

Another commented on the loss of dialect features among the Welsh L1 children:

He [Welsh L1 speaker] hasn't got the X accent at all, you've no idea where in Wales he comes from, and I think it's because of the Welsh medium system, there's no point just saying we're putting him in the Welsh medium unless there's a balance [for Welsh L1 speakers], it's not going to work. (T2:116)

However, while recognising the needs of the Welsh L1 children, the Development

Officers also cited negative experience in different *cylchoedd* of attempts to group children into different streams by language background, sometimes referred to as ‘segregation’:

We’ve had some problems in the past where children have been grouped on language ability and when the parents have found out they got a bit cross – so we group according to age...I don’t think you can [group by home language]. Certainly not in County Name. (T5:12)

I remember the days years ago when there was big trouble about segregating them. (T5:28-29)

The Development Officers’ data showed general agreement that such ‘segregation’ of children into different groups was seen negatively or as elitist. On the other hand, they agreed that intermittent grouping for certain activities was acceptable, such as taking the L1 speakers together for a more linguistically challenging story, because that would constitute provision of differentiated activities based on language need as part of the normal functioning of the group. However, such provision requires recognition, discussion and awareness raising on this issue at different levels among Development Officers, Leaders and parents about the benefits of providing for different children’s needs, rather than adherence to an apparently ‘fair’ but unsatisfactory grouping criterion of age, regardless of language background. While this line of thought tends to be rooted in beliefs about equality and fair play, in an educational context it raises the question of how best to reframe an interpretation of equal treatment from meaning only ‘the same treatment’, towards an acceptance that true equality requires identification of different needs and differentiation in order to meet those needs effectively.

Discussion

These results from Leaders and Development Officers working in Welsh-medium preschools, who face mixed groups of L1 speakers and L2 learners, point to a need to consider two main issues: the central one of immersion methodology, and the issue of

differentiated teaching within that methodology. With regard to the exclusive use of the target language, while about half of these Leaders reported using only Welsh in their groups, a significant proportion indicated that they were uncomfortable with, or concerned about using an exclusive immersion approach, because they see it as imposing a burden on very young children transitioning to care outside their homes. However, the data indicated that, even when these young children are settled into their new preschool/care-setting, many Leaders reported that they go on translating from the target language into English to ensure comprehension among the L2 learners. It was particularly interesting that many of those who commented on such translation to ensure comprehension prefaced this with a statement about ‘only speaking Welsh’, appearing not to see a conflict between translation into English for the L2 learners, and speaking ‘only Welsh’. These findings raise some issues with regard to the impact that a translation strategy in such groups may have, not only on the Welsh L2 learners, but also on the L1 speakers present.

As noted in the introduction, there has been ongoing debate about the merits of keeping learners’ languages separate in the classroom, and the implementation of immersion methodology. This debate has centred on the artificiality of rigid separation, with arguments that it fails to recognise the pedagogical value of crosslanguage transfer and the opportunities for building skills in both languages. The issue may have assumed greater prominence as a result of significant changes in group composition even in classic French immersion schools in Canada: Ballinger (2012) noted that, because this often now includes learners of widely different levels of proficiency in one class, it resembles, more closely than in previous decades, the experience of immersion in parts of Ireland or Wales (or, indeed this could be described as a characteristic of ‘Celtic immersion’, since it is also noted in O’Hanlon’s (2012) study of Gaelic-medium schools

in Scotland). Ballinger concluded that such changes to the classic model increase pressure to adjust immersion pedagogy in order to support pupils' language learning needs more effectively. She argues that such adaptation would constitute fitting the immersion process to the pupils' needs, rather than fitting pupils to the immersion model.

It is important to take account of both L2 learners' and L1 pupils' needs in making such adaptations. In the Welsh context, our concern is *not* to query use of English by some Leaders to young L2 learners who are upset and want their mummies, as is recognised also in Garcia's (2009) argument that complete compartmentalisation between languages may not always be appropriate. Rather we question whether acceptance of using English translation with L2 learners to ensure their comprehension provides the most effective input (as discussed by Turnbull 2001) or model of early immersion for these young children in the early stages of L2 learning. There is also a need to assess the impact of such translation on the quantity and quality of input to L1 minority language speakers in these mixed groups.

Discussion of the similarities and differences between translation and translanguaging are relevant here (see Lewis, Jones and Baker 2012 for a fuller discussion). They note that translanguaging was originally intended (Williams 1994) to refer to planned concurrent use of two languages in classroom tasks, where pupils receive information through one language and use it through their other language as a way of deepening their understanding and knowledge of content areas. They argue that translation, on the other hand, tends to be used in classrooms to get past blockages in the weaker language in order to transmit content. Williams (2000, 2002) claimed that translanguaging is most suitable for pupils who have a reasonable grasp of both languages, and is not likely to be effective in the early stages of language learning. He

claimed that translanguaging is a strategy for *retaining* bilingualism, rather than for the initial teaching of second languages. While there is significant enthusiasm for the opportunities that translanguaging offers in many language learning situations, including primary immersion contexts (e.g., see Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013 with regard to immersion parents and homework), Lewis et al. (2012) also argue that it is very important to recognise the function served by language compartmentalisation in the context of minority languages, where it offers ‘protected spaces’ to heritage or indigenous languages which are increasingly threatened by encroaching majority languages, in order to maximise fluency, confidence and positive attitudes to the language.

The strategies described here by some of the Leaders in the *cylchoedd* fit much more closely with the concept of translation than with translanguaging. It appears to be motivated among some of the Leaders by the laudable concern to avoid distressing children, but some reported translating words and directions to ensure comprehension among the language learners. Acknowledging that bilingual classrooms in the 21st century are moving to transglossic contexts in which languages are used flexibly as many bilinguals do, Garcia nevertheless noted that even when teachers use planned code-switching to ‘clarify or reinforce lesson material’ (2009, 299), they also need to monitor both the quantity and quality of their code-switching. This is where the endangered status of one of the languages involved is highly relevant. If, according to the reports of some Leaders in this study, the ‘protected space’ of some Welsh preschools incorporates translation for Welsh L2 speakers as a strategy to ensure their comprehension, then there needs to be consideration that this exposes preschool Welsh L1 children to a normalisation of adult code-switching in their Welsh-speaking educational context.

Another concern raised by the Welsh data relates to the danger that minority language L1 speakers who attend groups in which they are in the minority may not receive sufficient L1 support and enrichment as a counterbalance to the adjustments made for L2 learners. Thus, their experience of a preschool offering a protected-space for their minority language may, in some cases, offer them a model of Welsh use that is more tailored to suit the needs of L2 Welsh learners than it is for speakers of a minority language with restricted domains of use. Prioritisation of the needs of the L2 learners by offering English translation during preschool activities could not only significantly dilute the effectiveness of the immersion heritage language preschool for L2 learners, but if it is also accompanied by a lack of other support in terms of enrichment language activities for L1 speakers, grouping of L1 children to promote the habit of speaking the language to each other, and input from the Leader at the level they require to build vocabulary and accuracy, then it is not effectively addressing the needs of L1 speakers.

Overall, these data point to the need to review training with respect to immersion pedagogy and the need to maximise exposure to Welsh input. This requires that educators' beliefs and concerns (see Hüttner, Dalton-Puffer and Smit 2013) regarding young children's wellbeing should be directly addressed, given the reservations held by some about exclusive use of the target language imposing a burden. Only when those concerns are allayed by experienced practitioners can the issue of comprehension of the target language in preschool be discussed as not requiring regular immediate translation, but other methods of exposition to help children extract meaning. It is likely to be the case that a focus on language immersion methodologies in *cylchoedd* in mixed-language areas would be most beneficial initially, before attempts to address this issue in the groups with mainly L2 learners. This would be consonant with the Welsh Government's *Welsh-Medium Education Strategy* (Consultation

document 2009), which noted that “training needs to equip teachers [and practitioners] with suitable methodologies...to improve our understanding of language acquisition processes and language reinforcement techniques.” (p. 17)

The results also point to the need to raise awareness and offer training in differentiated approaches to dealing with L1 and L2 children in the same *cylch* in order to consolidate, enrich and extend the language of L1 maintenance pupils on the one hand, while at the same time providing a firm foundation in the target language for L2 immersion children. Children who are native speakers of a minority or endangered language have significant language needs, even if they appear fluent in the language (compared to L2 learners at least), and they need to be offered input at an appropriate language level to help them to develop their accuracy and vocabulary. This is emphasised by Baker and Jones (1998, 492) who noted a need for “a carefully structured program to ensure that the native speakers have sufficient input in the minority language. This might involve some separate activities in a small group, at a higher language level, and sufficient one-to-one interaction in the minority language in the context of primary education.” However, such provision requires significant resources in the form of high quality training and on-going support for teachers, as well as adequate staffing.

Conclusion

Working in Welsh-medium preschools presents many challenges, and the educators who tackle these in general show sensitivity for children’s wellbeing, high levels of commitment to early years’ objectives, and commitment to the Welsh language. This study points to the need to review their pre-service and in-service training in immersion methodologies in order to address their concerns about over-burdening very young L2

learners, and their perceived need to translate to ensure meaning. It also highlights the need to raise awareness regarding planning and providing for differentiated learning for L1 as well as L2 children in the same group. L2 children need to develop their comprehension skills in the target language, with basic vocabulary and simple structures, whereas L1 children's needs focus on enrichment to develop grammatical accuracy, and extend their vocabulary. Examination of these data provides valuable insight into what Leaders think and do when implementing immersion, rather than what current policy prescribes. Clearly, there are potential benefits of mixing L2 learners with L1 maintenance pupils in the same *cylch*, as discussed by Lindholm and Gavlek (1994) and Christian (1996)). However, it is also necessary to monitor both policy and practice to ensure that every child is offered the most appropriate provision for their particular needs. The evidence of high levels of Welsh proficiency among the majority of the sampled Leaders and Assistants in this study, and their concern for young children's wellbeing provides strong evidence of caring and committed educators. The provision of in-service training in the provision of differentiated teaching in respect of L1 maintenance and L2 immersion would support these educators, as would exploration of flexible approaches to grouping pupils that seeks to promote and enrich language use among young L1 speakers, while avoiding the negativity attached to more rigid types of grouping used in Wales in the past.

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Endnotes

1. The Welsh Government's Welsh-medium Education Strategy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010: 2.14) noted that:

For children from Welsh-speaking homes, Welsh-medium education involves reinforcing and developing their Welsh-language skills through a broad range of curricular experiences. For children from non-Welsh-speaking backgrounds, whose initial and main contact with Welsh is through school, this intensive Welsh-medium provision is through a process of linguistic immersion.

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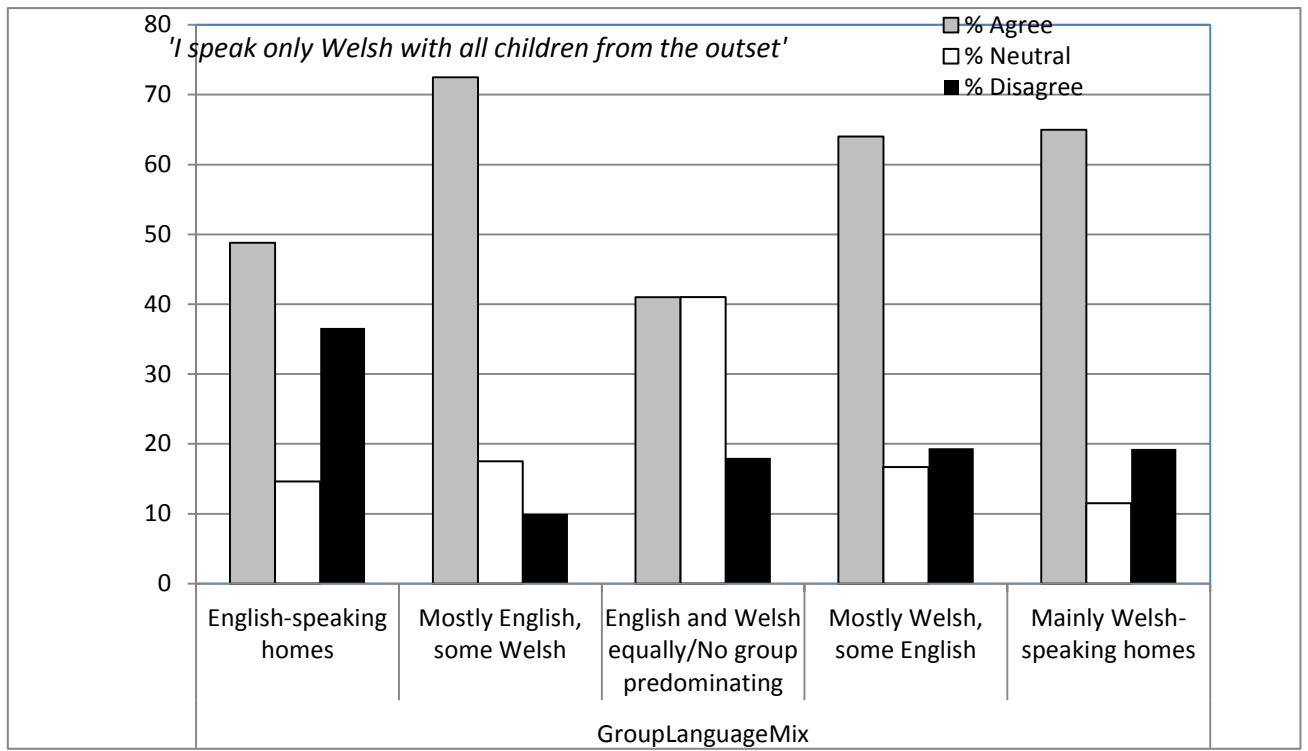
Table 1. Respondents' language catchment area by home language diversity reported in each *Cylch* (%)

| <i>Diversity in Cylch based on children's home language</i> | N | % |
|--|----------|----------|
| Mainly children from English-only homes | 41 | 25.5 |
| Most children from English-only homes, some from Welsh homes | 40 | 25 |
| Equal % of children from English and Welsh homes/No dominant group | 17 | 11 |
| Most children from Welsh homes with some from English-only homes | 36 | 22.5 |
| Mainly children from Welsh-speaking homes | 26 | 16 |
| % Total | 160 | 100 |

Table 2. Percentage of Leaders in groups with Majority of L2 learners v Leaders in groups with Majority of L1 speakers ranking each feature of *cylch* functioning in their top three factors in assessing a *cylch*.

| <i>Top 3 in Assessing Cylch</i> | % in <i>Cylch</i> with Majority of L2 Learners | % in <i>Cylch</i> with Majority of L1 speakers |
|--|--|--|
| Children at ease and stimulated | 65 | 61 |
| Great diversity of activities | 53 | 58 |
| Children engaged at all times independently or with others | 52 | 55 |
| Much verbal interaction (regardless of which language) | 49 | 50 |
| Effective planning and use of time | 41 | 50 |
| Structured play to promote intellectual development | 37 | 40 |
| High levels of Welsh use among children | 22 | 40 |
| Rich Welsh input from adults | 30 | 30 |
| Planned progress in Welsh for all children | 26 | 29 |

Figure 1



Leaders' use of Welsh with all children from the outset by Group Language Mix

FIGURES ALSO IN JPG FILE

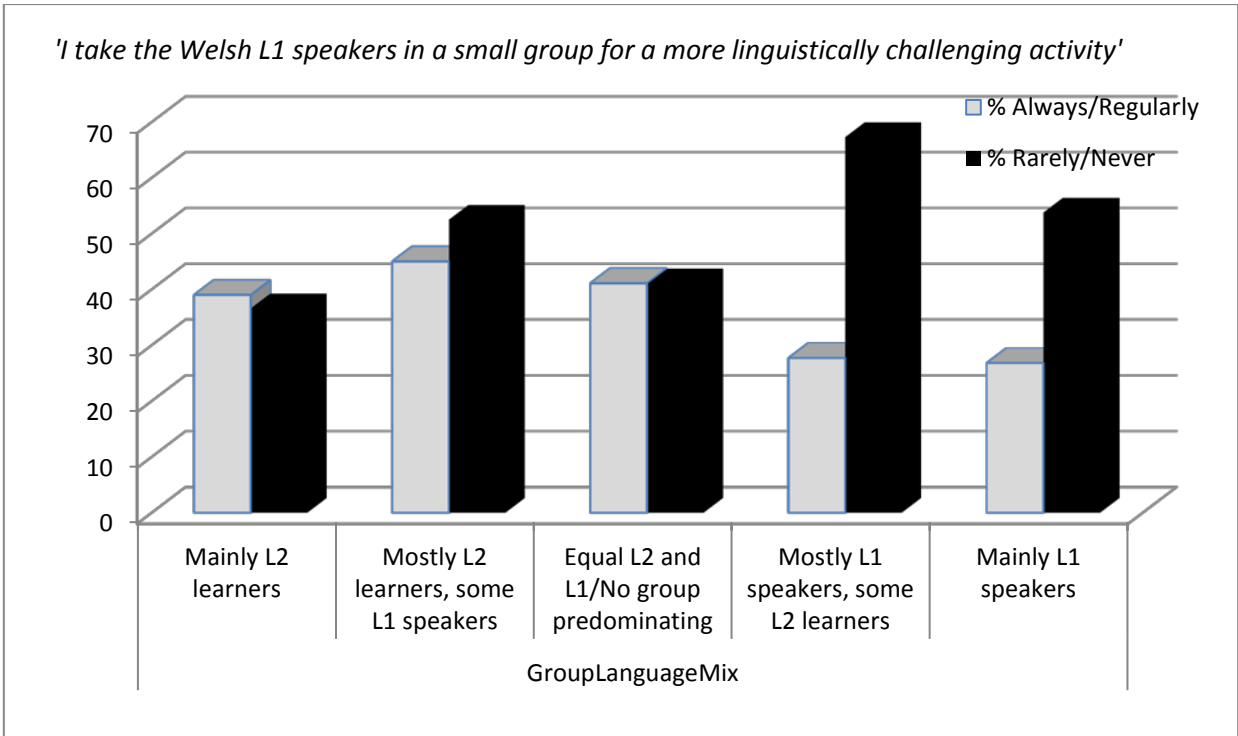


Figure 2 Reports of frequency of grouping the Welsh L1 children together for linguistically demanding activity by Group Language Mix

Endnote

ⁱ The Welsh Government’s Welsh-medium Education Strategy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010: 2.14) noted that:

For children from Welsh-speaking homes, Welsh-medium education involves reinforcing and developing their Welsh-language skills through a broad range of curricular experiences. For children from non-Welsh-speaking backgrounds, whose initial and main contact with Welsh is through school, this intensive Welsh-medium provision is through a process of linguistic immersion.