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Towards consistency: exploring Welsh–medium and bilingual apprenticeship delivery across a provider network

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a qualitative study conducted within a multi-provider apprenticeship network delivering health and care qualifications across Wales. Despite many apprentices entering with Welsh-language skills, internal monitoring found that only a minority completed their apprenticeship bilingually or in Welsh, reflecting the national completion rate of just 32 per cent (Stats Wales, 2025). This was a significant concern given Welsh Government priorities, Cymraeg 2050, and the need for the health and care workforce to meet Welsh Language Standards and provide the Active Offer. The study was therefore undertaken to understand how bilingual apprenticeships were interpreted within the network and to investigate the factors influencing apprentices' language choices.

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and Welsh-speaking apprentices were analysed thematically. Findings revealed learner-led interpretations of bilingual provision, inconsistencies in organisational definitions, and substantial influence from staff confidence, workplace language cultures, and apprentices' fears around written Welsh. The article identifies implications for organisational improvement and contributes sector-wide insights into strengthening Welsh-medium apprenticeship pathways.

Keywords: bilingual apprenticeships, Welsh-medium, translanguaging, health and care, learner choice

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Introduction

This study was undertaken within a large apprenticeship provider network responsible for delivering health and care qualifications across Wales. Internal quality assurance processes however revealed a persistent issue: despite strong Welsh-language policy and a substantial number of apprentices coming from Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, uptake of Welsh-medium pathways within the network remained low. Only a small number of apprentices chose to complete their apprenticeship in Welsh, and even fewer completed more than a minimal number of assessments bilingually.

Given the importance of Welsh to person-centred care, the requirements of the Active Offer (Welsh Government, 2021), and wider expectations for Welsh-medium workforce development (Welsh Government, 2024), the study sought to investigate how bilingual apprenticeships were understood within the network, how they were enacted in practice, and what influenced apprentices' decisions about the language in which they completed their qualifications.

Literature Review

The policy context surrounding Welsh-medium and bilingual education in Wales is extensive and increasingly central to national workforce planning. The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 granted Welsh official status and introduced Welsh Language Standards, placing legal duties on public bodies, including health and social care services, to ensure that Welsh-language provision is available. Post-16 education and training providers therefore play a critical role in developing a workforce capable of meeting these statutory requirements. This obligation is reinforced through More than Just Words: The Active Offer (Welsh Government, 2021), which establishes the principle that Welsh-language services should be offered proactively rather than only on request. The strategic ambition set out in Cymraeg 2050 further positions the post-16 and skills sector as essential in sustaining Welsh-language use beyond compulsory education and into employment, aligning language policy directly with employability and workforce development.

Despite this policy framework, Estyn (2008; 2017; 2025) has repeatedly reported that opportunities for learners to continue Welsh-medium study post-16 are limited and unevenly distributed across Wales. The Welsh Language Commissioner (2016; 2023) highlights a clear break in linguistic continuity at the transition from school into vocational routes, where Welsh becomes less visible and less routinely embedded. This disruption is associated with reduced learner confidence and lower uptake of Welsh-medium pathways within apprenticeships (Pierce, 2023), undermining the policy ambition to normalise Welsh across education and training.

A key structural issue underpinning this inconsistency is the lack of a shared operational definition of bilingual provision. While apprenticeship frameworks often specify that learning or assessment should be available in Welsh, these expectations are typically expressed in broad terms and interpreted variably by providers. Estyn's (2017) found that practitioners were frequently unclear about what constituted meaningful bilingual practice in apprenticeships. This reflects longer-standing critiques by Williams (2000) and more recent analysis by Davies (2021), which identify persistent ambiguity in how bilingualism is conceptualised and enacted in Welsh education.

Translanguaging is identified as an effective approach in minoritised language contexts, enabling learners to draw flexibly on Welsh and English to support understanding and assessment (Lewis et al., 2012; Cenoz and Gorter, 2022). Estyn (2025) reports that stronger Welsh-medium provision is associated with systematic use of translanguaging strategies. However, this pedagogical approach depends on staff linguistic confidence. Workforce data from the Education Workforce Council (2024) indicate that relatively few work-based learning practitioners feel confident to teach or assess bilingually.

Research by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol (2018) and Pierce (2023) shows that even fluent Welsh speakers often choose to complete assessments in English due to concerns about written accuracy and perceived academic risk. Behavioural insights from Davies (2021) suggest that framing effects also influence choice: when Welsh-medium provision is presented as routine and expected, uptake increases; when positioned as optional, English becomes the default.

As apprenticeships represent a major entry route into this sector, strengthening Welsh-medium apprenticeship provision is both an educational priority and a workforce quality imperative.

Methodology

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the ethics committee at Wrexham University. The research adhered to established ethical principles for educational research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and the protection of participants from harm (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2010). Ethical practice was also guided by the ethical framework for educational research produced by the British Educational Research Association, which emphasises respect for persons, transparency in research purposes and responsible data management (BERA, 2024).

All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and consent form in both Welsh and English. These documents outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, the use and storage of data, and the right to withdraw at any point without providing a reason (Bell and Walters, 2014; Denscombe, 2010). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and consent was re-confirmed verbally at the start of each interview.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and participant codes at the point of transcription. No identifying organisational or personal details were included in the reporting of findings. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected institutional systems, with access restricted to the researcher. Data management processes reflected ethical guidance on secure storage and responsible handling of qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2011).

Given the researcher's professional role within the provider network, particular ethical attention was paid to power dynamics and the risk of participants perceiving the research as evaluative. The study was explicitly framed as exploratory and developmental rather than judgemental. Participants were reassured that their responses would not be shared with managers and would not influence quality assurance processes. Reflexive practice was maintained throughout the research to monitor the researcher's positionality and potential influence on data collection and interpretation (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Hammersley et al., 2001).

Sampling Procedure and Description

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct experience of bilingual and Welsh-medium apprenticeship delivery or participation. The sample comprised ten participants drawn from a multi-provider apprenticeship network operating across Wales. This network included further education institutions and independent work-based learning providers delivering health and care qualifications at Levels 2 to 5. The network was selected because internal quality reviews had identified inconsistent Welsh-medium practice and low uptake among Welsh-speaking apprentices, making it a relevant and information-rich research setting.

Of the ten participants, five were practitioners and five were apprentices. The practitioner group comprised three Welsh-speaking staff members and two English-speaking staff members. All practitioners were directly involved in the delivery or assessment of health, social care or childcare apprenticeships. The apprentice group consisted of five Welsh-speaking learners currently undertaking apprenticeships within these frameworks. This composition enabled comparison between practitioner understandings of bilingual provision and learner experiences of choice and participation.

The small sample size is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study. As Denscombe (2010) notes, small-scale qualitative studies prioritise depth of understanding over breadth of representation. While the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the wider apprenticeship sector in Wales, it was sufficient to generate rich qualitative data and to identify patterns across participant accounts (Cohen et al., 2011).

Data Generation and Analysis

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, appropriate for exploring how individuals within the provider network understood bilingual apprenticeships and how these understandings shaped practice (Pham, 2018). Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and that meanings are shaped by context. This epistemological position aligns with the study's focus on practitioner and apprentice narratives, which provide insight into perceptions, experiences and decision-making processes that are not readily captured through quantitative methods (Pierce, 2023; Pham, 2018).

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with all ten participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they provide a flexible yet systematic means of exploring participants' perspectives, enabling the researcher to probe key themes while allowing participants to introduce issues of personal relevance (Cohen et al., 2011; Bell and Walters, 2014; Hammersley et al., 2001).

Data analysis followed an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. This involved repeated familiarisation with transcripts, systematic coding of meaningful units of data, development and refinement of themes, and synthesis of themes into an analytic narrative. An inductive approach was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study and the absence of a fixed conceptual framework for defining bilingual provision in apprenticeships (Denscombe, 2010; Byrne, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The results of the study identify four central themes highlighting how definitions, staff practice, learner and staff confidence, and workplace cultures interact to shape the opportunities available to apprentices. These findings reveal both the strengths and limitations of current provision and help explain the persistently low levels of Welsh-medium participation.

Understanding and Defining Bilingual Apprenticeships: A Flexible but Fragmented Landscape

The first major theme to emerge from the study concerned how bilingual apprenticeships were defined across the provider network. Practitioners repeatedly described bilingual provision as 'flexible', 'responsive', or 'led by the apprentice', but few were able to offer a clear or consistent definition of what such provision should include.

However, this learner-centred flexibility produced substantial variation between providers and even between assessors within the same organisation. Some practitioners considered any use of Welsh, such as informal conversations, coaching discussions, or greetings, as evidence of bilingual delivery. Others felt that bilingual apprenticeships required a structured, planned proportion of Welsh-medium

assessment. These contrasts were significant because they shaped the daily realities of learning: apprentices in different parts of the network experienced fundamentally different models of 'bilingual' provision.

This finding mirrors national research by Estyn (2017; 2025), which identifies the lack of a consistent bilingual definition as a systemic barrier. Within the network, the absence of shared language meant that bilingual apprenticeship practice evolved organically and inconsistently. Apprentices entering the programme were therefore not provided with a clear explanation of what bilingual pathways entailed, and many reported uncertainties about what was expected if they opted to complete elements of their qualification in Welsh.

This ambiguity is particularly problematic in apprenticeship environments, where learning spans multiple locations including workplaces, off the job sessions, assessor visits, online platforms and reviews. Without a unified definition, bilingual practice becomes dependent on the individual practitioner rather than embedded within the system. As a result, English subtly becomes the de facto default, even when learners have the linguistic capacity to work bilingually.

Bilingual Learning Environments: Variation Shaped by Staff Capability and Confidence

A second theme highlighted the decisive role of staff linguistic capability in shaping the bilingual learning environment. Welsh-speaking staff across the network demonstrated high levels of confidence incorporating Welsh into their practice. They described using Welsh informally during workplace visits, embedding bilingual terminology into teaching conversations, and providing opportunities for translanguaging allowing apprentices to move fluidly between Welsh and English depending on task demands. These practices align with the translanguaging approaches described by Lewis et al. (2012) and Cenoz and Gorter (2022) and reflect strong pedagogical grounding.

Yet this positive picture was not universal. Non-Welsh-speaking practitioners expressed discomfort about their ability to support bilingual learning effectively. Many lacked confidence in pronouncing Welsh terminology, assessing Welsh-medium work, or providing written feedback on tasks completed in Welsh. Even where bilingual materials existed, staff frequently avoided using them because they felt underprepared to do so. In some cases, practitioners admitted that they

"hoped" apprentices would choose to complete assessments in English because it removed the perceived pressure on them as assessors.

Apprentices who were supported by Welsh-speaking assessors often described their experience as encouraging and culturally affirming. Those working with non-Welsh-speaking assessors described their opportunities as 'limited' or 'non-existent', even when they were willing or able to complete elements of the programme in Welsh.

Apprentice Experiences: Confidence, Prior Learning, and the Emotional Weight of Written Welsh

The apprentices' accounts revealed a complex interplay between identity, confidence, and educational history. All apprentices interviewed identified strongly as Welsh speakers and expressed pride in their linguistic heritage. However, when asked about completing assessments in Welsh, each recognised a sense of anxiety. This was rooted not in their ability to speak Welsh, but in their fears about writing it to a professional standard.

Several apprentices discussed previous educational experiences, including the impact of gaps in learning and career changes into the health and social care sector, that had left them feeling underprepared in written Welsh. Although they had attended Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, they felt that their written Welsh had not been nurtured sufficiently to give them confidence in completing technical or reflective tasks. As one apprentice put it, 'I can talk Welsh all day, but writing it feels like an exam I haven't revised for'.

This emotional dimension aligns with the findings of Pierce (2023) and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's 2018 learner survey, which similarly found that learners often view English as the academically 'safer' choice. Within apprenticeships, where assessments directly influence employment progression, this perceived safety becomes even more important. Apprentices described choosing English not because they lacked Welsh-language competence, but because they feared that Welsh-medium work might slow them down that could affect their qualification.

Workplace culture further influenced their decisions. Apprentices working in settings where Welsh was frequently used by colleagues or service users felt more comfortable attempting Welsh-medium work. Others, working in English-dominant environments, felt that using Welsh 'did not fit' the workplace context.

One apprentice described how speaking Welsh with service users was valued informally, yet Welsh was absent from organisational documentation or team communication. This made completing formal assessments in Welsh feel disjointed from the reality of their working day.

Organisational Structures and Their Influence on Welsh-Medium Uptake

Another structural barrier involved scheduling and workload. Practitioners noted that producing bilingual resources or assessing Welsh-medium work added to their workload in ways that were not always recognised by management. As a result, some staff quietly avoided encouraging learners to opt for Welsh-medium assessment, contributing to the low uptake observed in internal data.

Why Uptake Remains Low in the Network

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Welsh-medium apprenticeship participation is shaped by a range of interconnected factors: unclear definitions, uneven staff capability, inconsistent workplace cultures, learner anxieties, and organisational systems that do not actively normalise Welsh-medium routes.

The network's flexible, learner-led approach, while supportive in principle, has allowed inconsistencies to become entrenched. Apprentices who enter with the potential to work bilingually often default to English because English is consistently easier, safer, or more predictable. Without systemic alignment across provider, assessor, and workplace contexts, Welsh-medium pathways remain fragile and highly dependent on individual circumstance rather than organisational design.

Conclusion

Conducted within a major Welsh health and care apprenticeship provider network, this study highlights the organisational and learner-level factors that underpin the persistently low uptake of Welsh-medium pathways. Findings show that unclear definitions, inconsistent bilingual environments, limited staff capability and apprentices' lack of confidence in written Welsh all restrict meaningful participation. Addressing these challenges will require clearer organisational

expectations, improved workforce development, and more deliberate embedding of bilingual practices across delivery and assessment. Strengthening learner confidence through supportive pedagogies and visible Welsh-medium options will also be essential if the network is to meet national ambitions for a bilingual workforce.

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