An overview of approaches to second language acquisition and instructional practices

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to contribute to the development of an evidence base for the teaching of Welsh as a second language in Wales. It presents a critical overview of methods and instructional practices of second language teaching and considers their relevance to the Welsh context.

2. Methodology

The report is divided into four main sections, covering 1) the goals of language learning, 2) psychological and social factors affecting language learning, 3) a review of popular approaches to and methods of language teaching and evidence of their effectiveness, and 4) an overview of other important considerations related to language teaching. The report ends with a list of key factors to consider when formulating policy regarding second language instruction.

3. Goals of language learning

Learning a second language involves the development of six kinds of competence:

1. Linguistic competence: the knowledge of the system and rules of the language;
2. Communicative competence: the ability to use the language to communicate in different social contexts;
3. Transactional competence: the ability to get things done with the language;
4. Interactional competence: the ability to manage relationships and social interactions in the target language;
5. Symbolic competence: the ability to value the target language and develop an identity as a user of the language;
6. Translingual competence: the ability to make use of a range of linguistic resources in a multilingual society.

In successful language learning these competencies are generally developed together and support and enhance one another. Because of this, many researchers advocate a 'holistic' 'multicompetencies' approach to language teaching.

4. Factors affecting language learning

Factors that affect the learning of a second language are usually divided into psychological factors and social factors.

Psychological factors include:

1. Cognition-related factors: factors related to how information is stored and processed in the mind;
2. Conation-related factors: factors related to people's aims and desires;
3. Affect-related factors: factors related to people's emotions and feelings;
4. Behavioural factors: factors related to habitual behaviours that people develop over time.

Social factors include:

1. Sociolinguistic factors: factors related to the linguistic environment in which the L2 is being learned;
2. Group membership and identity: factors related to learners' membership in different social groups;
3. Language attitudes and ideologies: factors related to how people feel about the target language in the learners' community;
4. Ethnolinguistic vitality: the degree to which people associate the language with an ethnic or cultural identity and wish to maintain it.

5. Language teaching methods, and evidence of effectiveness

Studies have shown that various forms of L2 instruction are effective in promoting L2 acquisition. Findings, however, are not conclusive enough to identify a single approach or method that works across a range of different contexts. Nevertheless, researchers have found that effective approaches to L2 instruction exhibit a number of characteristics. These include

1. comprehensible input;
2. opportunities for interaction and output;
3. feedback;
4. relevant and appropriate assessment;
5. strategies that facilitate autonomous learning;
6. metalinguistic knowledge;
7. metacognitive awareness;
8. pragmatic knowledge;
9. learner engagement.

In this report, four popular approaches to L2 instruction are assessed with reference to available empirical studies: 1) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); 2) Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT); 3) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); and 4) Post-method approaches to language teaching. Most research into CLT focuses on the effectiveness of communication-oriented teaching.

1) Communicative Language Teaching

CLT is based on the principle of 'teaching language as communication'. There is a focus on the *collaborative* nature of meaning-making. Being able to communicate one's intended meaning normally takes priority over being accurate. Most research into CLT focuses on the effectiveness of communication-oriented teaching. Performance of the learners in communication-oriented classes has been found to be mixed. Researchers conclude that the key focus in CLT classrooms should be achieving the right *balance* between communicative and analytical activities.

2) Task-based Language Teaching

In Task-based Language Teaching the goal is to give learners opportunities to engage in meaning-oriented language use in the form of tasks. By engaging in tasks, learners' attention is focused on meaning and the purpose for communication, and they receive immediate feedback from the people they are communicating with about whether they understand the meaning and intentions the learner is communicating. Research broadly shows the benefits of Task-based Language Teaching in developing learners' fluency, accuracy, autonomy, and active engagement in learning. At the same time, it suggests that successful implementation requires careful adaptations to local circumstances and language policies.

3) Content and Language Integrated Learning

Content and Language Integrated Learning refers to approaches in which curricular content is taught in the medium of the language being learned, such as in bilingual education or 'immersion' programmes. In most contexts in which it is used, the target language is not one learners are likely to encounter outside of school. Studies examining the effectiveness of Content and Language Integrated Learning have suggested that it can lead to moderate to high gains in proficiency over the long term without jeopardizing learners' mastery of academic content. The greatest gains have been shown to be in the areas of vocabulary and oral production. At the same time, difficulties in implementing CLIL programmes have been noted, especially in the area of teacher training. This approach has been used widely in the teaching of Welsh with some documented success.

4) Post-method approaches to language teaching

Recently curriculum planners and language teachers have been moving away from the idea that there is a single 'right' method for teaching language, and have come to the conclusion that the most effective approach to language teaching is to employ a combination of methods. One approach that has emerged from this thinking is the 'ecological approach' to language teaching, which advocates creative educational experiences and learning activities which can awaken learners' agency and provide them with opportunities to work as members of learning communities on challenging projects. Another popular approach is known as 'principled pragmatism', which focuses on allowing teachers to experiment with, evaluate and analyse different instructional practices within their local contexts.

6. Other important components of second language instruction

Achieving successful L2 learning is only possible if it is supported by an effective and well-planned curriculum that carefully considers the syllabus, assessment strategies and the provision of teacher training.

1) Syllabus

Syllabus design should be informed by an analysis of learners' needs. The key considerations are what learners want to do with the language they are learning, whether they are going to use it in written, spoken or both modes, whether it will be used for communication in family, social, educational or employment contexts, and what expectations and standards exist for using the language in these different contexts.

2) Assessment

Delivering a successful L2 teaching method is not possible without a carefully designed and implemented assessment strategy. Assessment is particularly important as it directly affects what teachers and learners do in class. It can also impact other areas of learners' lives. Assessment can take a summative, formative and dynamic forms. While summative assessment is useful for measuring achievement and progression, formative assessment is a useful way for collecting information about what learners know, and what they need to do to achieve what is expected of them. Dynamic assessment is a more recent concept that links assessment and instruction through interaction and collaboration between learners and teachers.

3) Teacher-training

A well-informed approach to language teaching and assessment requires a supportive language teacher education programme that is informed by critical theory and critical L2 pedagogy, promotes reflective thinking about policy and practice, and allows teachers to become autonomous professionals.

7. Conclusions and Key Points for Consideration

Conclusions

1. Successful language learning requires *multiple competencies* including linguistic, communicative, transactional, interactional, symbolic and translingual.
2. Successful teaching programmes must take into account both individual differences among learners and the social factors that might influence their learning such as the status of the L2 where they live and their opportunities to use it in their daily lives.
3. There is no evidence that any of the widely used approaches/methods for language teaching reviewed here is clearly superior to the others, and the current trend in language teaching is to combine methods to meet local circumstances.
4. Both Task-based Language Teaching and Content and Language Integrated Learning have strong empirical bases to support their effectiveness.
5. Task-based Language Teaching in particular has shown success in developing learners' transactional competence.
6. Whatever approach/method is employed should be integrated into a well-planned syllabus and supported by clear targets and robust assessment methods.
7. Progression and achievement should be carefully mapped against the needs of learners and employ clear language descriptors at each level of proficiency.
8. A successful programme of language teaching must be supported by a well-designed teacher training provision that promotes teacher autonomy, reflection and empowerment.

Key Points for Consideration

1. Consider *transactional competence* as integrated with other kinds of competencies and teach and test it in a meaningful context of communication.
2. Consider adopting more Task-based Language Teaching and engaging learners in meaningful projects that are related to their interests and the realities of their language use outside of school.
3. Welsh is taught in a range of contexts throughout the country, and different teaching approaches/methods may be more or less suitable for different contexts.
4. Consider not just the educational and employment values associated with learning Welsh, but also the social, cultural and symbolic values associated with it, and address these in policymaking and in teaching.
5. Conduct more research on a) the needs of different kinds of learners, b) the effectiveness of different teaching methods in specific contexts across the country, c) the best ways of assessing different competencies, d) the best ways to train teachers for different contexts, and e) the best way to motivate learners to learn Welsh.
6. Invest in the promotion of Welsh outside of educational contexts in ways that are attractive and relevant to young people, through, for example, popular culture and platforms for digital communication.