

## **“A tough hill to climb alone” – Welsh learners speak**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a phenomenal increase in the number of adults learning Welsh over the last 40 years, students originating from within Wales and outside, but only a limited number of students who enrol on courses progress to fluency and become integrated in a Welsh speaking community. It has been argued that this could be due to the use of out-dated methodologies in the classroom and that the implementation of more innovative approaches could decrease the drop out rate. This paper argues from experiential data that at least as many of the barriers learners face arise *outside* the classroom. This phenomenon is not unique to Wales and lesser-used languages as autobiographical accounts from elsewhere testify. The paper demonstrates the urgent need for research into the little penetrated area of Welsh learners' experiences so that strategies can be developed to assist learners to practise and use the target language. The main barriers discussed are learners' anxiety and lack of confidence, the failure of native speakers to provide practice and their tendency to switch to English.

### **Background**

The 1960s was a decade of revolutionary change in the approach to teaching adults Welsh, as changes in classroom strategy encouraging oral/aural work enabled learners to communicate more easily with native speakers. Traditionally Welsh as a second language taught to adults and children was of a literary nature, bearing little resemblance to the spoken language encountered in the community. In the 1970s the pioneering of intensive courses inspired by the ULPAN method used to teach Hebrew to immigrants in Israel helped generate a phenomenal growth in the number of learners, particularly in the 1990s. Whilst many learners are of Welsh origin and wish to restore a language not transferred to them by previous generations, a large proportion are from outside Wales.

Only a limited number of students progress to fluency and become integrated in a Welsh speaking community, however, and it has been argued that the implementation of more innovative approaches could decrease the disappointingly high drop out rate (Evas, 2001). Minimal studies have been undertaken on classroom methodology in Wales but interviews by Newcombe

(1995), Newcombe & Newcombe (2001a) and Lewis (2001) indicate that the majority of students reacted positively to current classroom methodology. This paper argues that Welsh learners are hindered by problems they encounter *outside* the classroom and that these barriers could in part account for the drop out rate.

### **Journals as Research Instruments**

Arguments for using diaries and journals as research instruments are not discussed here as they are well documented (e.g. Bailey, 1991). Following Nunan (1989) and Cohen (1998) the author considers that diaries and journals are valuable instruments for generating data that may be inaccessible through other research techniques and that they can assist in discovering what is 'significant to learners', a matter of vital concern as 'much research is turning away from teaching to learners and learner variables' (Cohen, 1998). Most of the published diary and journal studies on language learners are classroom based, however, less than one third being either exclusively or partially community based (Bailey, E-mail communication, 1999).

Diary and journal research on language learners has increased in prevalence in the States since the 1970s but has been far less common in the UK, though an interesting example of an introspective diary study is Jones' (1994 & 1995) discussion of his self-study of Hungarian over 11 months. Jones concluded that personalized, real-message practice tasks were vital and that lack of speaking practice was less problematic than a lack of listening practice. The use of diaries or journals as research instruments and/or pedagogical tools amongst Welsh learners has been virtually non-existent. Hill (1987) produced closely related work in his compilation of interviews with in-migrants to the traditional Welsh heartland areas, including learners demonstrating that they had to be determined if they were to use their language skills with native speakers because of barriers to negotiating entry into the L2 community. Jones (2000) asked Welsh learners in Clwyd,<sup>1</sup> mostly in-migrants,<sup>2</sup> to keep a diary of the use of Welsh and English over one or two

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<sup>1</sup> An area of North East Wales linguistically similar to Cardiff.

<sup>2</sup> It appears that the term "in-migrant" has come to be used in the Welsh context, rather than the more established term "immigrant", to avoid the implicit connotation of foreignness. "Immigrant" suggests someone who comes from another country, whereas "in-migrant" is quite likely to be someone from the same country/state but who has previously lived in another area within that country/state. Most "in-migrants" in Wales are from other parts of the UK. It is also assumed (in the EU context) that an immigrant

days as part of a wider study in 1993. She concluded that students were able to negotiate new social identities for themselves through their use of Welsh and that the in-migrants' use of Welsh in daily life depended on the way they valued the language and had opportunities for use. Lewis (1999) includes her introspective journal written when a Welsh learner in New Zealand in the 1980s in a book on L2 learning. She became increasingly interested in affective factors such as motivation, occasions for language use and other people's expectations and was particularly surprised at the effect of praise and encouragement by her tutor and tutor's husband on her efforts. Another particularly telling comment was her admission that accuracy has to give way for the sake of fluency when 'thrust into a genuine conversation, when one wants to say something rather than practise the language.'

### **The Study**

Study of Welsh learners' experiences when they practise the target language in the community is therefore a pioneering venture in Wales. A study by Newcombe (1995) noted a link between regular practice of language acquired in the classroom and its continued use on completion of an intensive course. The study of barriers and incentives to practice is of particular value as experienced tutors emphasise that students learn to speak the language not in the classroom but in the real world. Jones (1989: 11), a learner from Ireland, makes the cardinal point:

The first big breakthrough in learning the language comes, not when you achieve near perfection in a formal class but when the locals continue to speak Welsh in your presence.

By asking learners to record what hinders and promotes their practice it may be possible to understand why many students begin learning Welsh with high motivation but do not persevere to fluency, a research question posed by Williams (1994).

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is part of a disadvantaged community within the host state, perhaps open to discrimination, perhaps without legal rights, disadvantaged financially and in terms of material resources. Within the context of in-migration in Wales it can be argued that the host community is disadvantaged in terms of its relations to the in-migrating population; in terms of financial and material resources (which are less than those of the in-migrating population as a whole), and also in terms of linguistic and cultural matters (as the in-migrating population carries the official, privileged language of the State and its accompanying culture).

Concentrating on experiential data, mainly from journals, this paper reports on 9 learners who as part of a longitudinal study<sup>3</sup> volunteered to report their perceptions of what happened when they tried to practise/use<sup>4</sup> Welsh acquired in class in the community in Cardiff in a journal over an eight week period. Brief reference is also made to interviews and focus groups which were part of the same study. It is important to note that as participants *volunteered* to write they are not necessarily typical of learners generally, but are arguably typical of committed learners. The paper concentrates on learners' encounters with Welsh speakers, in particular their willingness to sustain conversation, and compares them with learners' autobiographical accounts from other contexts. In Cardiff, the capital of Wales since 1955, Welsh is not the language of the community as it is in the traditional heartland areas of West and North West Wales. However, the number of Welsh speakers has increased over recent years and there is an increased Welsh language ambience in the city. The dominance of English in Cardiff means that if learners do not have social contacts who are Welsh speakers, it is difficult, particularly for those with a busy lifestyle, to sustain regular practice in the community.<sup>5</sup> Students, who were assured of anonymity, were given a hardback book in which to write, at the front of which were bilingual guidelines.<sup>6</sup>

### **Barriers highlighted by learners**

Lack of confidence emerged in all the journals and was exacerbated by the tendency of Welsh speakers to switch to English. Kim, an advanced learner from England, whose husband speaks Welsh and whose children attend Welsh-medium school wrote at the beginning of her journal:

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<sup>3</sup> For details see Newcombe & Newcombe (2001b).

<sup>4</sup> The words are used interchangeably as when learners are speaking in the community it is not always possible to distinguish between practice and use.

<sup>5</sup> In some areas of Cardiff almost 12% of the inhabitants speak Welsh, in others only 3%, and the proportion of Welsh conversations overheard is much lower than these figures suggest.

<sup>6</sup> Students wrote in Welsh, English or a mixture but the English contributions and translations of the Welsh contributions are included here. For a discussion of entries in Welsh and English see Newcombe (2002).

Sometimes people do not wait until I find the right word – they are trying to help me and turn to English – aargh! Afterwards I lose confidence immediately and in the past I would have continued in English. Now I make a big effort to go back to Welsh. It's strange that one of the worst culprits is someone who runs a Welsh-speaking business. ... My parents-in-law are first language Welsh speakers but when I say something in Welsh to my mother-in-law she answers in English every time. My father-in-law is better. He will ask me questions and speak to me in Welsh.

However, towards the end of the journal she reached a compromise:

I speak Welsh with my parents in law while the children are awake. This means we make an effort for a few hours and then relax ...

I find that setting myself defined targets for speaking Welsh works quite well e.g. one hour in – the swimming pool OK – Welsh only and on a shopping trip - for about one hour I'll speak Welsh all the time.

She was also coping with Welsh speakers who turned to English.

I went to ... and spoke Welsh to the owner and a Welsh-speaker from school. Both insist on answering in English. This used to make me feel very inferior and I would give up and speak English. However, I have noticed lately that in situations such as these I am persisting in Welsh and feel more able to take the attitude they should be ashamed for not supporting a learner.

Her final entry indicated that her confidence was increasing and she was using more Welsh:

I definitely feel I've made a transition now – there are several people in school who instantly speak Welsh to me, whereas 3 months ago, I rarely spoke Welsh to them and if I did it felt unnatural and didn't last long ... Last week I had coffee with a Welsh lady nearby – this is someone I meet on the road to school and speak Welsh for about 5 minutes. I was quite daunted at the thought of an hour. However, it was very good – I understood the majority of the conversation, which flowed because I fleetingly slipped into English for difficulties but made sure to return to Welsh. Progress is being made.

Kim had clearly developed a set of strategies to enable her to cope with hindrances.

Alan, an advanced learner from Cardiff whose children attend Welsh-medium school bemoaned the fact that many Welsh-speaking friends spoke mostly English to him.

Huw and family came this morning. We mostly speak English which disappoints me but when you have a long friendship with someone it is difficult to relax and converse in a language you have only been learning for 4 years and you are in your forties!

He contrasts Huw's attitude with that of Welsh friends and acquaintances who expect to speak Welsh.

Nan from North Wales is a first language Welsh speaker. She *expects* me to speak Welsh just as the staff at the nursery and school expect me to. I like that consistency ... At work I met up with Colin who used to be in my team. He is from Swansea and we always speak Welsh even though I struggle sometimes. It's this *expectation* bit again ... I talked to the head teacher about Rick – now she never uses English. No, I can't remember a single occasion! Again, it is *her expectation* ... I phoned Albert, who was a strong influence on my decision to learn Welsh. Again we have reached the point where *we expect* to speak Welsh together.

A useful domain for practising Welsh is the Welsh-medium nursery. However, students involved reported that native speakers often failed to provide the much needed practice opportunities. Lydia, an intermediate student from England who works as a nanny, wrote:

What happens is that you tend to get two main groups, one which is made up of Welsh learners and the other of native speakers and although I do try and interact with both groups my ability to converse with native speakers is limited and they do not seem very good at accommodating me. In fact, quite surprisingly they seem happier to speak to me in English than Welsh (unless this has something to do with my pained expression). When I am in the Welsh learners' group I tend to make more effort than most of the others.

Another intermediate learner from England, Sharon, whose children attend Welsh-medium nursery wrote in a similar vein:

It was my turn to be the parent on duty at Ysgol Feithrin [Nursery School]. I asked the leader not to translate into English for me as my understanding is better than my spontaneous conversation, but she kept forgetting, which was frustrating because I began to feel a bit alienated and could not summon up enough confidence to speak Welsh to her ... Sometimes when I've tried to use some Welsh but get stuck and have to use English phrases

it is hard to return to the Welsh as quite often the Welsh speaker hasn't the patience to wait until I've thought of what I want to say.

Over weeks though Sharon tried to overcome her fear of communicating with Welsh speakers:

I am slowly summoning up courage to talk to fluent Welsh speaking parents at Ysgol Feithrin but I feel shy again especially as they are quite reserved and quiet and I do not know them very well.

She realised that an effort had to be made by both parties if Welsh conversations were to develop:

I spoke a little in Ysgol Feithrin with the Welsh speaking childminder but got chatting and the conversation reverted but I have asked her to be stricter with me over this as I think I need to be nudged back into Welsh when I lose confidence or feel too lazy!

Sharon sensed that some children were not sure whether to speak Welsh to her or English but observed that she found it easy to speak Welsh to one little girl as:

She *expects* people to speak Welsh to her.

The notion of expectation clearly mobilizes learners to continue using Welsh. By the end of the journal writing Sharon realized that there were many opportunities to use Welsh of which she did not avail herself. This was a subject discussed in a subsequent focus group, where learners agreed that one of the most useful functions of the journal writing had been to make clear to them that they were missing opportunities for a variety of reasons, often because of their own anxieties.

At Mother & Toddler today it was busy and I managed to speak Welsh to a few people. I am using it more with the children but the more I do the journal the more I realize how little I am making the most of the opportunities to use my Welsh but it is very hard to summon up the confidence, which is definitely the biggest problem!

It is useful for learners to capitalize on practice opportunities with their children and/or other family members. Kim attempts to do so:

I speak to the children off and on in Welsh e.g. most mornings once we leave the house for the walk to school my eldest son switches into Welsh automatically so where possible I continue in Welsh. A bit more Welsh is

creeping in between my husband and me in the evenings, usually because he and the children have started in Welsh and I continue.

Alan also practises with his own and other children, which he finds easy as so much of the same material is repeated with young children. Many learners express a preference for speaking to children as they find it less threatening because the language used is not complex. Andrea, for example, an intermediate learner from Cardiff whose children attend Welsh-medium school, wrote extensively about complicated conversations in Welsh with adults on subjects such as bulimia, religion and drug addiction. In these conversations, she often had to revert to English as she did not have the necessary vocabulary.

I have spoken Welsh to a few people this week and always revert to English ... I do not have enough Welsh for the nitty gritty of life or to be able to express myself properly. I speak to the children in the nursery in Welsh just about all the time (unless I slip). I find it much easier to speak with them than adults ... I don't have heavy conversations with children and there is always something to say because I am doing something with them, like painting or singing.

Opportunities for conversation were limited for students who had no Welsh speaking family, friends or colleagues. Nor was practice as straightforward as might be expected for everyone with a Welsh-speaking family. Roger, an intermediate learner from England with Welsh ancestry, wrote:

My children go to Welsh medium primary school and are regarded by my first language Welsh speaking neighbours as being indistinguishable from first language Welsh speakers. However, they find my attempts at speaking Welsh excruciatingly amusing but refuse to explain where I am going wrong. Conversations therefore last a few minutes only before they collapse into English.

Rhys, an intermediate student from North East Wales, has two teenage children who attend Welsh school, but they are not mentioned in his journal. At an interview, however, Rhys said his sons never used Welsh at home and it would be impossible to practise with them as every time they hear their parents using any Welsh they laugh. They are only overheard using Welsh when mimicking teachers. In classes I conduct I often hear similar comments from students.

Cathy, an intermediate student from England whose husband is a second language Welsh speaker and whose children attend Welsh-medium school, has

not been successful in obtaining Welsh-speaking practice at home. She volunteered at a focus group that she felt uncomfortable speaking Welsh with her family and that writing the journal had made her realize how little her Welsh had developed despite learning intermittently for over 20 years. Her journal records practising with teachers at the children's school and with individuals she met casually and at museums with varying degrees of success in sustaining a conversation. She said at interview that she rarely watches television. However, in the journal she wrote:

Rugby on the television. My husband and sons were watching. I was quite surprised because I followed every word. I decided it is easier to listen to the television because there is no chance to answer back.

She finished her journal with the sentence:

Why is learning Welsh such an emotional seesaw of success and failure?

Students, who *are* able to practise with their children and other family members benefit greatly not only in language skills but also in confidence. Philip, an intermediate student from the South Wales valleys has two sons who have completed Welsh-medium education and a Welsh-speaking wife. In his journal Philip referred to learning Welsh as a 'snakes and ladders' experience in that he frequently makes progress but if that progress is not built upon by attendance at classes and regular practice he slides down a snake and has to start again. Discussion with Avril, his wife, resulted in the development of the following strategy:

On a 3 day cycle – Day 1 – we have a Welsh conversation when we get up until it is time to get out and do our separate things. Day 2 – we chat if we meet up at lunchtime or if we don't at teatime. Day 3 we share in conversation during the evening. Avril's thinking being that there will be a variety in terms of things pertinent to talk about – one doesn't get into too set a pattern and hopefully it will be quite relaxed.

This strategy proved to be successful.

We've managed, with a few unavoidable slips, to make good progress with this scheme of things and I'm gaining confidence – also noticeable is my eagerness to chatter away in Welsh when Welsh speaking friends have popped in recently.

The cooperation of Welsh speakers be they children or adults, family members, work colleagues or acquaintances is of paramount importance for developing confident L2 speakers. Whilst L1 speakers may feel they are

helping by switching to English this is not only depriving learners of much needed practice opportunities but can make some feel demoralized and contemplate giving up. At a subsequent focus group Alan expressed such feelings thus:

You put yourself on the line, there's no shield, if they reject you on language you're rejected, not really taken seriously, condescended to. As if they're saying, "Speak English, it's much nicer for both of us." It's demoralizing and I wonder why do I bother?

### **Comment**

Interestingly Alan and Kim who presented as the most fluent learners at the focus group stressed their vexation at the tendency of Welsh speakers to turn to English. Perhaps it is in crossing the final bridge from learner to Welsh speaker that students feel particularly vulnerable and interpret the switch to English as a reflection of their grasp of the language. At interviews it was disclosed that, apart from Alan, all the students have been attending classes for many years and, albeit intermittently, some for as long as 20 years. Yet apart from Kim, they were all attending at intermediate level. They are all professional people, capable of learning an L2. However, at interview and at focus group it became clear that factors such as a busy life style, daily life through the medium of English, lack of confidence and perceived problems with native speakers have made progress towards fluency piecemeal and fluctuating.

Themes emerging from these students' journals also appeared in a recent learner's autobiography (Higham, 2002). Like Philip & Cathy, Higham experienced fluctuating feelings about her ability as she progressed towards fluency. She likened the process of learning Welsh to playing Super Mario on a Game Boy, coasting along and then smashing into a wall and feeling that she would never get over the wall. Then she would receive a boost and be up and over the wall and coasting along again until she hit another wall. And so it went on. These fluctuations were reflected in all the journals to a greater or lesser degree. Few L1 speakers persisted in speaking to Higham in Welsh. She admitted that, though eager to become fluent, she was reticent to practise outside the classroom and found it difficult to switch from English to Welsh with those she had known for some time. The problem arose not merely from the Welsh speakers but also from her own ambivalence.<sup>7</sup> She tended to shy

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<sup>7</sup> Ambivalent attitudes to practice were also reported by Petro (1997: 47): 'Every time one of us begins a sentence in English I wince under the twin reflexes of relief and

away from speaking to adults, finding it much easier to speak to young children, but found it extremely beneficial when she encountered Welsh speakers who *insisted* on speaking Welsh to her at all times. Here we have the notion of expectancy stressed by Alan and also mentioned by other students. Higham reports that it was the well educated that persisted in Welsh conversations, those with little education implying that her Welsh was ‘too educated’ for them. A breakthrough in fluency came when she moved from Cardiff to Dyfed, a traditional Welsh-speaking area, for five years and was immersed in Welsh in the community and the workplace. She found it difficult during her first year in Dyfed to persist in speaking Welsh but by the second year it became second nature. She returned to Cardiff a confident second language speaker who teaches Welsh to adults and children and has taught French through the medium of Welsh. Cardiff students do not have the immersion opportunity afforded to Higham and it is therefore of paramount importance that they are able to capitalise on every practice opportunity.

Review of adult Welsh learners’ autobiographies<sup>8</sup> indicates that learners write extensively of problems encountered when conversing with Welsh speakers. Difficulties recorded were mainly associated with their tendency to switch to English, speaking too quickly and the gap between language in class and that encountered outside (e.g., the use of dialect and slang). Many learners report that L1 speakers say learners’ Welsh is ‘too good/too posh (Hill, 1987), ‘too good’ (Jones, 1993) or ‘too correct’ (Trosset, 1993), ‘too posh’ (Petro, 1997), ‘more accurate’ (Jones, 2000) or that they speak as a *siaradwr bwcwelsh*, [book Welsh speaker] (Castle 2002),<sup>9</sup> suggesting that help is required by the target group as well as by learners. Gruffudd (1979) attributes the tendency of Welsh-speakers to turn to English to their lack of confidence as many attended English medium school and did not receive formal Welsh

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shame.’ This is also a characteristic of other L2 learners reported by researchers (e.g. Pierce, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Jones & Newcombe (2002) list literature in English and Welsh where learners describe their learning experiences.

<sup>9</sup> When Lewis (2001: 23), returning to West Wales after years abroad, attempted to use more erudite Welsh than had been his custom in the local community, several people he spoke to for the first time formed the impression he had learned Welsh as a second language. Lewis concluded that anyone speaking ‘pure’ Welsh is immediately categorised as a learner, which may not make integration into the local community easier.

lessons. This results in feelings of inferiority when they hear learners using words unfamiliar to them. The Welsh speakers feel threatened by learners, who interpret this as a refusal to help.<sup>10</sup> Interviews by Newcombe (1995) revealed that whilst students found Welsh speakers helpful on occasions, there were times when they appeared impatient and/or turned quickly to English. Students usually ventured such comments hesitatingly and one wonders whether the attitudes to Welsh speakers on questionnaires in the same project were less positive than numbers would indicate. All but one student seemed almost duty bound to praise Welsh speakers and possibly like Trosset (1984) they concluded that most are genuinely delighted, though surprised, at a learner's interest but find conversation difficult. Trosset (1986) highlighted an important issue in relation to language learners and native speakers.

Language learners are essentially like small children in their linguistic ability ... Because most Welsh learners are mature adults, it is embarrassing for everyone concerned for them to be treated like infants. Therefore both the learners and the native speakers are likely to opt for the English language in which they can interact according to their appropriate social level of maturity.

Trosset (1984: 48) observes that:

All second language speakers known to me achieved fluency by abandoning or even ignoring the formal learning process and voluntarily immersing themselves in the company of native speakers.

If this is true, the cooperation of the native speaker in the learning process is essential.

Welsh speakers may not realize how desperate learners are to practise and might be more supportive if they realized that many learners aim to cross the bridge from learner to speaker. As Gardner (2001: 1) comments:

Some cultures accept learning more than one language as a simple fact of life; others consider it a relatively rare and difficult event.

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<sup>10</sup> Dufon (E-mail communication, 1999) reported that she experienced similar problems to Trosset (1986) persuading native speakers to use Javanese when she was learning. They always used Indonesian. She believes this could be attributed partly to the fact that many Javanese are afraid to speak it for fear of making a pragmatic error.

Native speakers are surprised that learners wish to exchange more than pleasantries in Welsh as they may presuppose the learner is pursuing a hobby rather than aiming at fluency. The situation is complicated by the fact that some learners attend classes only seeking to acquire a smattering of the language and never envisaging they will integrate into Welsh society. Such learners may display fear and anxiety when they encounter a native speaker or fluent learner and shy away from using Welsh. Consequently the Welsh speaker is not sure what the wish of an individual learner they meet is. Learners, who seek to become fluent, however, tend to interpret the Welsh speakers' diffidence to use the language as a rejection.

The tendency of native speakers to turn to English with learners is arguably a greater problem than regional variations and accents. Learners often lack confidence and if they do not receive a positive response when they first use the language, may withdraw, believing that their Welsh is inadequate. Disappointing encounters with native speakers are not unique to Wales or even to lesser-used languages. MacCaluim (2000: 7) describes how difficult it can be for Gaelic learners in Scotland to be accepted seriously. Smith (2000) concurs, stressing that ordinary people in Gaelic-speaking areas are reluctant to use Gaelic with learners because of natural courtesy, and do not encourage learners to cross the bridge to become fluent speakers.<sup>11</sup> She contrasts this to the Welsh experience where there is actually an expression *croesi'r bont* [crossing the bridge]. Smith, a Welsh learner, believes the learners' lot in Wales is much easier than that of a Gaelic learner in Scotland.

In Israel where motivation would be expected to be high on the part of both learners and Hebrew speakers because of the strong cultural and political implications of promoting the language, Shapiro (1989) reports that it is often difficult to persuade Hebrew speakers to give learners practice. Liu (1984) in an entirely different context, seeking to improve his English in the USA, also found it was not easy to find opportunities for practice despite being surrounded by the language. Apart from a few people who became friends everyone seemed too busy. Language used in daily life is very different from that used in books and Liu (1984: 56) needed 'lively English' to enable him to communicate more naturally. Much of this he acquired through watching television. In another context Newcombe (2001) found many hindrances to

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<sup>11</sup> Whilst a similar phenomenon has been observed in Ireland Ó Cuinneagáin (E-mail communication 2002) believes that learners are becoming more accepted as they become increasingly common.

using German with native speakers such as problems with dialect and accent but particularly difficulties persuading Germans who could speak English to use German, as they conversely were eager to practise English. She concluded that learners, particularly beginners would be discouraged if the same situations were encountered and all but the very determined would probably revert to English.

### **Conclusion**

The place of anxiety as a barrier to language learning has been given considerable attention over the last 30 years (Gardner, 2001) and is viewed as one of the main factors blocking effective language learning. Macintyre (1995) refers to work by Gardner & Macintyre (1992, 1993) demonstrating that social context can influence cognitive processes in language learning and stresses that anxiety can impair performance more when speaking than when learning. Welsh learners' biographical accounts revealed how encouraged learners were when native speakers helped them, many indicating that this was a turning point in their learning experience. If native speakers switch to English this can increase learners' anxiety levels and impair performance even more, but if they continue to sustain a conversation despite learners' shortcomings and offer praise, confidence is likely to increase.

It is vitally important that learners have opportunities to practise in authentic situations and efforts are made to remove all barriers to practice. The learner's willingness to communicate (WTC) outside class and the value of interacting with native speakers has been highlighted in recent L2 research literature. Macintyre, *et al.* (2001) indicate that social support, particularly from friends, was associated with higher levels of WTC outside the classroom. Lo Castro (1998) and Norton and Toohey (2001) advocate more research focusing on the social dimensions in learning, concentrating on the learners' reception in particular socio-cultural communities, arguing that those able to negotiate entry into target language social networks are likely to become successful learners.

Professor R.O. Jones, Director of Cardiff University's Centre for Teaching Welsh to Adults stressed:

Fluency will never be achieved if Welsh speakers switch to English ... social interaction is vital if learners are to become second language speakers ... Head knowledge, linguistic facility, needs to be translated into social reality. Learners need to be able to use their newly acquired skills with other Welsh speakers in a cross-section of normal everyday social

contexts. Welsh has to cease to be a classroom language, and adult learners need to gain confidence in using it (Jones, 1999: 449).

Native speakers' assistance is particularly important in Cardiff where Welsh is not a community language but a language of networking. Learner preparation on how to deal with potential problems outside the classroom could help alleviate learners' anxiety and result in greater understanding of native speakers, whose reactions described by learners indicate they sometimes lack confidence and would benefit from advice on how to help learners. Jones (op. cit) advocates establishment of social centres within easy reach of most learners, a network of organizations and activities which could potentially address the situation. If such schemes could be established they could be used to prepare learners and native speakers to help each other. Learners cannot survive without the support of Welsh speakers for as Thomas (2001), a learner from the United States, has noted, learning Welsh, though 'a struggle worth the pain', is a 'tough hill to climb alone'.

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