

EAFT–ELETO Symposium

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Summary about the status of their national language as instruction language in the universities in Wales

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Contrary to the situation of national languages as an instruction language in most other European countries in recent years, the story of Welsh as a medium of instruction has been one of growth and renaissance. Admittedly this has been from a very low starting base, since Welsh as a minority language was not widely used as a teaching medium at university level for most of the twentieth century. Apart from teaching Welsh itself as an academic subject, there was some activity in teaching through the medium of Welsh in subjects where Welsh traditionally had a strong presence, in History, Theology and Music, but even this was confined to some universities in north and west Wales, where the language was strongest. Often, it was left to individual lecturers to teach through the medium of Welsh if they wanted, but this would have been in addition to their normal (English medium) workload.

This situation changed dramatically in 2011 with the establishment of *Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol*, the Welsh-medium National College. This is a virtual college, with a presence distributed across all the universities in Wales, dedicated to Welsh-medium teaching and research. It is funded by the Welsh Government through the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The political reasons for its founding are threefold, namely:

- the parent-led increase in demand for Welsh-medium teaching within the school system in Wales catering for 5-19 year olds, leading to pressure to provide post-19 education in Welsh also
- the Welsh Language Act of 1993 and subsequent legislation providing greater legal rights and protection for the Welsh language
- the establishment of devolved government for Wales in 1998, giving Wales autonomy over education in Wales.

The decision to distribute Welsh-medium provision throughout all Welsh universities, rather than concentrate it on one geographic site, was also a political one, based on the fact that all the universities wanted a share of the new funding, whether they had supported Welsh-medium teaching activities in the past or not. It is also facilitated by the availability of new technology to share resources and teaching across different geographical locations, thereby achieving economies of scale.

The Coleg's national strategy is underpinned by numerous policy documents, including its academic development plan. This sets out to offer comprehensive coverage of academic subjects in Welsh, grouped together under four grand themes: Arts and Humanities; Social Sciences, Business and Law; Health and Social Care; and Sciences. In at least one instance, that of Philosophy, it has resurrected an academic discipline which had ceased to be taught in Welsh universities in either language. It is not possible in every instance to offer a full degree course through the medium of Welsh, but the provision of at least 40 credits (out of a 120 credits for a full degree) is encouraged through funding mechanisms. Post-graduate scholarship through the medium of Welsh is also funded, both at Masters and PhD level, and the emphasis is on producing a new generation of Welsh scholars able to lecture, write and research through the medium of Welsh.

To deliver this strategy, a hundred posts for Welsh –medium academics across all disciplines will be created by 2015, together with 40 research scholarships. A large number of undergraduate bursaries are also given out annually to students studying all, or part, of their courses, through the medium of Welsh.

Underpinning this development of Welsh-medium education at university is the parallel development of resources, such as a national portal for delivery of electronic teaching materials, video conferencing suites for distance learning, a peer-reviewed multi-disciplinary Welsh language academic journal, and, of special interest to us in EAFT, terminology standardization.

Statement on the need to understand the importance of multilingual instruction for innovative, conceptual thinking in research and science

Traditionally, the argument put forward for teaching through the medium of Welsh has been the student's right to be educated in their own language. More recently, at least in Wales, it has been argued strongly that university education through our national language is needed to underpin the new national bilingual policies of government. Thus we need policemen, lawyers, teachers, social workers, civil servants, environment officers, and all those professions who come in contact with the public, to be able to deliver services in both Welsh and English. This has been a strong driving force for the establishment of Welsh-medium courses at university level.

I put to you however that there is a third, very strong reason, why we need to promote teaching and research through all our own national languages at the university level, rather than let English predominate. That reason is the conceptual health of humanity. As a terminologist, I know very well that not all concepts are understood in the same way across different languages. The differences may be subtle, it may involve a different part of speech, a different grammar construction, a different way of grouping things, as well as more obvious differences where some concepts only have names in one or a small number of languages.

Different ways of seeing things, different ways of expressing things, are at the deepest levels of innovation and cutting edge research. Einstein understood this well, and worried that he was missing something in his quest to unravel the great fundamental mysteries of physics, because of the way his thinking was constrained by both his native German and by English. His fellow physicist, Neils Bohr, from Denmark, also worried about this:

“European languages, [Bohr] noted, perfectly mirror the classical world of Newtonian physics. When we say "the cat chases the mouse" we are dealing with well-defined objects (nouns), which are connected via verbs. Likewise, classical physics deals with objects that are well located in space and time, which interact via forces and fields. But if the world doesn't work the way our language does, advances are inevitably hindered.”

“Bohm pointed out that quantum effects are much more process-based, so to describe them accurately requires a process-based language rich in verbs, and in which nouns play only a secondary role.”(Quoted from David Peat, New Scientist, 05/01/2008).

A world in which all new scientific knowledge was created in English would be a very impoverished world, in the same way as a world dominated by growing only a few agricultural crops would be impoverished. We understand very well the arguments for biological diversity in plant life, we also need to understand the arguments for conceptual and therefore linguistic diversity in academic life.

I will end with the words of William Salesbury, the great Welsh Renaissance scholar, who wrote in 1547 (I translate from the Welsh): If you do not wish to be worse than animals . . .

obtain learning in your own language; if you do not wish to be more unnatural than any other nation under the sun, love your language and those who love it.

Note

For *Y Coleg Cymraeg Cendlaethol* see their bilingual website <http://www.colegcymraeg.ac.uk/en/>.
Their learning portal may be found at <https://www.porth.ac.uk/en/>.

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