# The Welsh Language and New Speakers



**“Learning Welsh helps me feel I belong... It’s made me more and more attracted to the language and Welsh culture. I want to stay here and it’s important to learn the language.”**

Joseff Gnagbo, Chair of the Welsh language society, Cymdeithas yr Iaith, a refugee from Côte d’Ivoire who has learned Welsh in a year.

## What does ‘New Speakers’ mean’?

‘New Speakers’ is a term that has become more popular in recent years. It refers to people who have learned a language in a setting outside the home.

So first, we’ll look at the different ways of learning a language. Then, we’ll go on to consider who the new speakers are in Wales, how they come to speak Welsh, and why they are important to the future of the Welsh language.

Some people, like Joseff Gnagbo, learn the language intentionally and have lessons. Other people “acquire” a language, which means they learn a language without making a conscious effort.

Image: Joseff Gnagbo © Huw John

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## What does the term 'new speaker' mean?

New speakers are speakers who have not learned the language naturally because their parents or carers already speak the language. So, which of these speakers are you?

**Traditional speaker:** Someone who has acquired the language at home or in the community. The word 'traditional' refers to the idea that acquiring a language from your parents or carers is something to be expected.

**New speaker:** Someone who has acquired a language in another way by moving to a new country or by learning the language as an adult.

**Learner:** Someone who is making a deliberate effort to learn a language at the moment. It is possible to be a learner and a new speaker but there are several new speakers who are no longer learners.

## Examples of new speakers

### Maleeha

Maleeha speaks Urdu with her parents and has acquired English from the community in Cardiff.

Maleeha goes to a Welsh School where most of the lessons are in Welsh. She uses Welsh in lessons and sometimes in the Community.

### Tom

Tom is from Manchester. His family moved to Anglesey when he was 8 years old.

Tom went to an 'Immersion Unit' to help him learn Welsh and to schools where most of the lessons were in Welsh.

He speaks Welsh with his friends and in the community. He has also trained as a Welsh Translator.

### Sara

Sara comes from a non-Welsh speaking family and lives in Wrexham.

She had Welsh lessons at school. She started learning Welsh again at the age of 50.

Sara is now a Welsh tutor in our area, she speaks Welsh with her new friends from the lessons and conducts a Welsh choir.

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Looking at the table, we can see the differences between these new speakers.

Maleeha started to acquire Welsh in school at a young age. Tom started learning Welsh because the family had moved to Anglesey. After that, he acquired quite a lot of language in the community. Sara learned some Welsh at an English medium school in Wrexham. She set about learning and using the language again when she turned 50.

Tom and Sara use Welsh at work, with their friends and in the community. Maleeha uses the language in lessons, but she speaks English with her friends. All three use Welsh in different ways but they can use the language in a number of different settings. What this means is that they are bilingual speakers.

That's what is interesting about new speakers. Their experiences are so different, but the research shows that there are common patterns between them.

## How do you use Welsh and where do you use it?

# Eve's story



Eve Myles in 'Keeping Faith' © S4C

**"I believe the message S4C sent out by casting me in this role was so powerful and liberating. If you're thinking in, or you are learning Welsh, you are keeping the beautiful language alive. Mistakes are what you learn from, so welcome them and move on."**

**"I'm proud of the journey I went on and grateful for the kindness and encouragement I had from those around me every day. I'll have Faith, always."**

Eve Myles - Interview with the National Centre for Learning Welsh November 2020.

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You may be familiar with the actor, Eve Myles. She learned Welsh to be able to use the language when she was acting the main part in a drama series, 'Un Bore Mercher' on S4C ('Keeping Faith' in English on the BBC). Although Eve, who is from Ystradgynlais, had some Welsh education, she could not speak much of the language until she got the part of Faith Howells in this popular drama.

Eve succeeded in learning Welsh and used it in three series of the television drama. This is what she said about her experience in an interview with the Centre for Learning Welsh.

## Why learn Welsh?

It's something I've always wanted to do, but never had the opportunity to do before. I've two young daughters and I also want to encourage them to speak Welsh. That, and when a part like Faith comes along, you have to bend over backwards, learn a language and if that's what it takes to play it, then that's what you do.

## What benefit is there to learning Welsh?

There are lots of benefits. I'm able to feel comfortable around people who speak Welsh, and if I'm spoken to in Welsh, I don't clam up or find myself apologising anymore. I feel the advantages are that I'm learning something always and I can pass it on to my daughters.

## What's your advice to other learners?

Be patient, be kind to yourself, and recognise what you've achieved.

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## Who are the new speakers in Wales?

You might think that new speakers like Eve are something that has only happened recently in Wales. But Wales has a long history over centuries of people learning Welsh as adults.

If people moved to live in an area where only Welsh was spoken, and no one spoke English, people had to learn Welsh to be able to talk to them. The situation changed when more Welsh people became bilingual (or changed to English altogether) during the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840).

These days, there are three types of new speakers:

- new speakers who have acquired the Welsh language through 'immersion' education (immersion education means that pupils receive all their education, or part of it, through the medium of a new language to become new speakers of that language)
- new speakers who have acquired the Welsh language through English-medium education
- new speakers who have acquired the Welsh language through learning as adults.

## Did you know?

1. 18.2% of 3–4-year-olds are 'traditional' Welsh speakers.
2. Not all parents who speak Welsh use the language with their children. In homes where both parents speak the language, 80.7% of 3–4-year-olds speak the language. In homes where one of two parents speaks Welsh, 40.4% of children speak the language.
3. About 17% of pupils in Wales are taught through the medium of Welsh.
4. About 60% of 5-year-old pupils in Welsh or bilingual schools come from non-Welsh speaking homes.
5. The percentage of new speakers in individual schools varies. For example, in a secondary school in Gwynedd, around 90% of pupils speak Welsh at home. In Rhondda Cynon Taf, around 90% of pupils in Welsh schools are new speakers.
6. Welsh language education would not be possible without commitment from parents to ensure that their children become new speakers of the Welsh language in areas that do not have many first language speakers, such as the Rhondda.

(Source: 2021 Census)

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## Leaving school, and the challenge of maintaining the language

And what happens after school? Certainly, many new speakers continue to use the language in their personal lives and at work. There is not much research into this, but many pupils stop using the language too.

The reasons for this change are complex. Perhaps the opportunity to use the language decreases after many new speakers leave immersion education. Or maybe some of them have negative experiences at school or feel that they are not confident enough to use the language.

One thing to remember is that our use of languages can change during our lives, and this depends on a few factors. One pattern, for example, is that speakers who have been through immersion education stop speaking the language after leaving school but make changes when they have children of their own. Many of them want their children to go to Welsh-medium schools and start using more Welsh themselves as a result.

## Why learn Welsh as an adult?

**"In December 2023, Duolingo announced that the app's Welsh course had hit a record 3 million learners, proving particularly popular in the US, Argentina, New Zealand and India."**

Gwenno Robinson,
The Guardian,
28 December 2023.

There are many ways to learn Welsh as an adult. The National Centre for Learning Welsh is responsible for courses across Wales, and it is possible to learn to a high level. In addition to these lessons, there are many other online courses (e.g. Say Something in Welsh), books, (e.g. Learn Welsh in 12 Weeks) and apps (e.g. Duolingo) to help learners.

People learn Welsh as adults for different reasons and in different places. Here are some reasons given by learners in a recent study:

| | The percentage (out of 746 learners) who agreed with the reasons below |
|---|---|
| To communicate with other Welsh speakers | 85 |
| To preserve the Welsh language | 84.2 |
| Because I'm Welsh | 64.8 |
| To integrate into the Welsh speaking community | 62.6 |
| Because I live in Wales | 60.8 |
| To use Welsh media | 59.9 |
| To speak to my children who attend Welsh schools | 48 |
| To improve skills in the workplace | 35.7 |
| Because I have to learn Welsh at work | 15 |
| To speak to my partner and my partner's family | 14.2 |

*Source: 'Motivations for Learning Welsh among adult learners' (2022) Cardiff University Press

## Learner of the Year

Did you know that an award is given to the learner of the year at the National Eisteddfod every year? In 2023, the award celebrated its 40th anniversary. One of the winners is Spencer Harris from Coedpoeth, near Wrexham, who won the award in 2001. He is now vice president of Wrexham Football Club. In August 2023, he told Newyddion S4C how he emphasised the importance of the language to the Club's famous owners, the actors Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds:

**"As director of Wrexham Football Club, I have done many television and radio interviews in Welsh over the last 20 years.**

**"And when we sold the club to Ryan (Reynolds) and Rob (McElhenney), I made sure that they understood the importance of the language from day one... They have now attracted a lot of attention to Wales and the Welsh language."**

**It's good news that new speakers are keen to use the Welsh language and contribute to the continuation of the language.**



Spencer Harris with Ryan Reynolds (left) and Rob McElhenney (right) in 2023 © S4C.

# Joseff's story

**"...the Welsh language is open. It's open to everyone, whatever your background."**

**"I really want to contribute a lot to the Welsh language, because of what I received from it, and for the Welsh-speaking community, I also want to contribute and give back."**

Joseff Gnagbo in an interview with the BBC in 2023.

Joseff had to leave his home in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa because of the civil war there in 2011. He found refuge in Cardiff and raised a family there. Joseff can speak several languages, including Welsh. He said that some teachers think that learning Welsh can be "confusing" for refugees like him from a foreign country. But Joseff is keen to show that this is not the case:

**"But what they forget is that most refugees and asylum seekers already come from a multilingual background, so they can learn many languages."**

Joseff Gnagbo




Joseff Gnagbo © Iolo Penn

## How many languages can you speak? Do you dream more in one language than another?

Someone like Joseff, who speaks several languages, can dream in one language one night, and maybe another night in a combination of several different languages! Research shows that people tend to dream about home life in their first language and work life in their other language or languages. Cool!

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## A million Welsh speakers by 2050?




The Welsh Government wants one million people to be able to speak Welsh **by 2050**.

**"...We need to reach a position where the Welsh language is an integral element of all aspects of everyday life. If we want to achieve this, the whole nation has to be part of the journey – fluent Welsh speakers, Welsh speakers who are reluctant to use the language, new speakers who have learned the language, and also those who do not consider themselves Welsh speakers. Everyone has a part to play, and we want everyone to contribute to realising our ambition."**

Welsh Government's
Million Speakers Strategy

New speakers have the choice of either stopping speaking Welsh or continuing to use the language. We must ensure that there are more new Welsh speakers, especially in English-medium schools. Then, the new speakers need to be encouraged to use the language and made to feel that their Welsh is good enough.

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## Welsh for everyone

It doesn't matter how you speak Welsh! The important thing is that you speak it. Accepting new speakers is important. They need to be given a chance to use the language, without being judged if they get things wrong. The only way we can help new speakers feel like they are a member of a community of Welsh speakers is by welcoming them.

Unfortunately, many new speakers still have experience of negative criticism which can lead to feelings of not belonging. It's important to remember that Welsh is for everyone!

# Ameer's story



Ameer Davies-Rana presenting 'Cwis Bob Dydd', a Welsh language daily quiz ©S4C.

One person who supports the goal of reaching a Million Speakers is the television and radio presenter, from Ammanford, Ameer Rhys Davies-Rana. Ameer travels to schools across Wales to encourage young people to use the language in their everyday lives. This is what Ameer told 'Wales Online' about how to attract more new Welsh speakers:

**"If we look at what young people like these days, they like social media - Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. They like people like Stormzy, KSI and Mr Beast. Here in Wales, we need our Welsh language YouTubers, TikTokers, influencers and rappers. It's something different and something cool."**

**"People need to look at Wales and the Welsh language - perhaps it's a small market, but there are opportunities there. It's right on our doorstep and it's there for the taking."**

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**And here are his 'top tips' for new speakers ...**

**"Like any skill, the more you practice, the better you get! Words can turn into sentences; sentences turn into a conversation and a conversation is good enough to be fluent."**

# Go for it!

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