Learning Welsh: A Guide

Learning Any Language

There are two paths to learning a language, the fast track and the slow track. You want to spend time on both.

The Fast Track

The bare minimum you need to get by is just simple grammar and essential vocabulary. For Welsh, both of these are provided in the online lessons: level A gives you the minimal grammar and the most common words in the language.

The Slow Path

This is just absorbing whatever comes your way, reading and listening, and putting the language together out of isolated fragments. This gives you richness and context and is more fun than grammar, but takes more time.

Learning any language is a challenge, but a language like Welsh presents a few special challenges. This short guide is designed to help you find your strengths and avoid the pitfalls. In short, to get the most out of the learning process. It is divided into three sections:

①   The Language
>   The particular facets of Welsh that need special attention (and a few that need no attention at all).

②   The Learner
>   Strategies you can use to make the most effective use of time and resources.

③   The Class
>   How the class can best work for you.

Welsh: A User's Guide

Welsh is a minority language, which means that unlike French, German, and Spanish, there isn't one single correct version of the language. This is good, in a way; in Welsh, it is perfectly acceptable to drop an English word into conversation if you need to, and mistakes won't impede communication nearly as much as in other languages. On the other hand, it can be extra confusing. There are multiple dialects, primarily North and South, and multiple registers, primarily literary and conversational. The drawback is that for many words, you'll have to learn one form but also learn to recognize others. The best plan is to choose one for your focus (for example, Conversational South Welsh), but not to worry if you mix and match.

Learning Welsh requires memorizing two sets of information, vocabulary and grammar. Chances are good that you have had bad experiences with grammar in the past. It is often taught badly, meaning that it people find it boring and often learn "facts" that are not actually true. Grammar does not have to be boring and painful! A common pitfall among language students is that they expend more energy avoiding the grammar than they would spend just learning it. It is true that in the short term, if you avoid grammar, you learn faster and it's more fun, but in the long term, you get stuck and it becomes very difficult to get beyond Absolute Beginner. (If that last sentence hits home, don't worry, but do start paying more attention to the grammar.)

Grammar. With grammar, you need to memorize rules. There really aren't that many. It is helpful if you can go beyond and understand how and why they work, but it's not 100% necessary—you probably speak English without being able to explain all of its grammar. Welsh has a few features which appear scary at first, but are simple. For example, the alphabet and the mutations can be learned quite quickly. The truly scary features only come later, in complex sentences.

Different languages are easier or harder depending on which language you start from. If you speak English as a first language, Welsh is harder than French, Spanish, or Italian, but easier than Russian, Gaelic (whether Irish or Scottish), or Chinese. Overall, it's probably around the same level of difficulty as German.

More complicated features of Welsh are the word order, which is very unlike English, and the parts of speech,

which aren't exactly the same as the ones you are used to. You must be clear on the English parts of speech before trying to learn Welsh.

The verb "to be" is also a necessary but uphill struggle. In Welsh, the first words in a sentence is usually a verb. The subject follows the verb, and the rest of the sentence comes after that. Welsh uses pronouns and prepositions much more than English, and in some unusual ways. Pronouns conjugate (so there are different words for "with" and "with me" and "with you", etc.), and pronouns can possess verbs: in Welsh, the word for "my" followed by "telling" means "telling me" when translated.

Some of the other features to do with time and traditional counting are also quite unusual, but very interesting!

Vocabulary. When you learn a word, it is essential to learn its part of speech and, depending on that, some further information.

Verbs, often called *verb-nouns* in Welsh, consist of a stem and endings. *Caru* means either "to love" (verb) or "loving" (noun), and its stem is *car-*. Both forms must be learned, because it is not always possible to guess the stem from the dictionary form or vice versa.

Nouns are either masculine or feminine, and the plurals are also not predictable so must be learned individually. For nouns, then, you should learn the singular, the plural, the gender, and the meaning.

Prepositions often have a conjugation, and these need to be memorized; prepositions and conjunctions also often trigger *mutations*, or changes in the starting letter of the following word, and these need to be learned as well.

Particles don't even exist in English. They tell you the quality of a sentence (is it a question? negative?).

Adjectives and **Adverbs** share a close relationship in Welsh, governed in part by particles and mutations. Mutations are also a concern for **Pronouns** and **Conjunctions**.

Remember that there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between Welsh and English. The English word "spring" might be *gwanwyn* or it might be *ffynnon*, depending on what kind of spring you mean, season or fountain; *glas* might be translated as "blue", its basic meaning, but it could be "green" or "grey", depending on context.

The Learner

You have to be self-motivated, because the external motivations (I need it for work, I need it to talk to people who have no English) won't apply here. Welsh's minority language status also means that it is more difficult to find resources (whether classes and textbooks or entertainment) outside of Wales, but they are available, notably online. There is a wide variety of resources, from systematic lessons (http://www.siaradcymraeg.com/, for example) to Wicipedia in Welsh to music to youtube video lessons. The main thing is to devote time to it. Ideally, at least 15 minutes every other day. That's around an hour a week. The more the better, obviously, but even a short period every other day is much more effective than large blocks of time every once in a while.

Only you know your level. If you are just starting, have a look at the pronunciation guide on the Society's website (here). Tell me specifically what you need (my email), and I'll try to help you find the best resources.

There are four aspects to any language: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Two of these skills are passive, and two are active; two are oral, and two are written.

	Passive	*Active*
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

Passive skills are best for acquiring new information, such as vocabulary and grammar. Active skills are best for cementing your knowledge (i.e. practice makes perfect). Everyone finds the passive skills easier to acquire than the active skills, and most people find the written skills easier than the oral. If you find speaking Welsh much harder than following a conversation or reading it, you're not alone!

How should you spend your Welsh time? Every learner is different. Spend a little time with yourself first and

figure out what works best for you. Everyone uses a different mix of skills to acquire new knowledge: audio, visual, and kinæsthetic, or in other words, whether you learn best by hearing, watching, or doing. If you like music, find a recording of a song and learn the lyrics; they're probably posted online somewhere. Keep listening until you can hear which words are which; practice using some of the phrases. Make flashcards or label your kitchen in Welsh or talk to the cat—whatever works for you. One reading strategy that is effective is to take a children's book (because the language is simpler) that has been translated from English to Welsh. Read the English until you know it well, and then read the Welsh. Having the plot and images in your head already will help make sense of the text.

Be creative. Learning a language has real and practical benefits for your mind, so why not include other beneficial brain exercises like writing poetry or letters or stories? Think of ways you can use Welsh in your daily life: translate the advertisements on the bus, or start exclaiming "ych y fi!" whenever you're mildly annoyed or disgusted. If you're just beginning, rewrite English words in the Welsh alphabet: Fancwfer, Bwrnabu, Siatl.

There is also a psychological aspect to learning a language, particularly on your own. There is a certain amount of frustration: frustration at not making progress fast enough; frustration at not understanding much (or any) of what you see and read; frustration at comparing yourself to other people who seem to be doing better. It is crucial that you tolerate a little bit of frustration. *Frustration is a symptom that your brain is working to solve the problem.* Too much frustration, of course, is bad, but a little bit just means you are being challenged, and like broccoli and sprouts, it is good for you. (Note: if you're experiencing overwhelming frustration, lower your expectations. It's not a race!)

Do not compare yourself to other learners. Ever. It is easy to assume that you are alone in not understanding something, or that other people are progressing better than you are, but you do not know what their background is or how much time they are able to put into it. Use your fellow learners to help, but never let your perceptions of where they are affect you. Learning is a highly individual process.

On the other hand, do expect to forget some of what you learn. It is natural when learning a language to take a few steps forward and then to take one back. The occasional "I should <u>know</u> this!" is a good sign, and as long as your overall progress is forward, you're doing fine.

The other thing to watch out for is putting up your own roadblocks. For example, in the sentence,

Mae'r bachgen yn fyrbwyll, ond mae ei galon yn dda

you might get stuck on the word "*fyrbwyll*". Whether listening or reading, it is far better to learn to take this as

The boy is something, *but his heart is good*   or even
The boy is something, something else *is* something else   rather than making this mistake:

The boy is fyrbwyll. *What on earth is* fyrbwyll? *I can't understand this. I must find out what this one word is. . .* while you lose the thread of the conversation or the text.

When listening, trying to ignore the gaps and just accept the conversation as a puzzle with pieces missing. When reading, a good rule of thumb is to look up one word per sentence if you're a beginner, one word per paragraph if you're more advanced, but in any case stop when you've learned five or six new words. Let them settle, and come back to it later. Eventually, you'll get more and more from context alone.

The Class

There are many different kinds of language classes. The best kind meet frequently (at least thrice a week, but four or five times a week is better). They are taught in tandem by native speakers and fluent learners, both with extensive experience teaching the language, and there is a set schedule and orderly lessons from excellent textbooks. All the students begin and proceed at the same level. Everyone attends and participates enthusiastically, and at the end of each session everyone is given a slice of cake, a fluffy kitten, and a winning lottery ticket.

Unfortunately, we don't have the numbers or the budget to offer those classes, even without the kittens and lottery tickets (we do usually have cake). Our class in particular runs on a very different model. We meet only once a fortnight, which poses certain challenges. The biggest one is retaining what you have learned from lesson to lesson.

The second-biggest is being at a different level from others in the group. In a way, the strategies for both are the same.

① **Take what you can get and leave the rest.** Some of the material, whether vocabulary, grammar, or the reading, will be beyond you. You're fresher at the beginning of the night than at the end. As long as you get *something* out of each lesson, you're making progress. When your brain is full for the evening, tune out and let the sounds of Welsh wash over you. This is serious advice: passive exposure won't hurt you, but fretting will. Try to go back to it at least twice a week in between classes, and move what you've learned from short-term into long-term memory. (This can be done by sheer rote repetition, by word or image association, by understanding and contextualizing, or by any number of other techniques.)

② **Engage actively.** Have fun! Try to go a little bit beyond. In the conversation section, can you substitute a different word or phrase? With the grammar, can you apply it to a different example? With the reading, what can you understand before it is translated? Even a single word is something! Certainly don't be shy about speaking out or making mistakes, essential to the learning process. Your mistakes make the other learners feel better about their own, and it's a bonus if they're funny.

③ **Ask questions of the instructor.** I may not know the answer, but I can always find out. The benefit of having an instructor is that I can explain the grammar to you, help you translate a passage, and serve as a sounding board for the progress you've made during the fortnight. If you are worried that other people will be annoyed or think less of you for asking questions, rest assured: nobody minds. They are grateful that somebody else asked. Others have the same questions, and you are doing them a favour.

④ **Don't worry if we get ahead of you.** You have a lot of demands on your time outside of class, but so does everyone else. I expect you to progress at different rates, and nobody minds. Your classmates are always grateful for a little review, and you don't have to learn in sequence: the langauge is a network, not a line, and you can jump around from subject to subject. In fact, one of the biggest mistakes you can make is trying to learn all of Step One before proceeding to Step Two. If you approach a language in that way, you will never progress.

⑤ Strategies for Older Learners: **You need more repetition.** You never stop learning, but as you age, it takes more repetition for new information to move from short-term to long-term memory. Don't assume that what worked in school will still work: change strategies to adapt to the new situation. This is also good for the brain!

⑥ Most Important: **Make use of the class as a community.** Talk to another learner for five minutes a day in Welsh only. Email each other in Welsh. Share neat words. It doesn't matter if you make mistakes as long as you practise! Commiserate with other learners on how hard it is. Share techniques for what works and what doesn't. You'll progress faster and have more fun if you treat this as a social project, not a lonely individual one. Remember that **success is continual improvement, not perfection**.

Use the class for inspiration: as a reminder, every so often, that learning Welsh is something you want to do. Look around and see the evidence that even so far away from Wales, people can and do learn Welsh.

Dysgwch!