**Motivation for learning and continuing to learn Welsh in digital spaces: experiences during the UK Covid lockdown**

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**Abstract***Welsh is a UK minority language with unevenly distributed speakers, making it difficult for learners outside Welsh speaking areas to hear and practice Welsh. Therefore, digital spaces, by connecting existing learners and speakers, can provide support, as can using digital devices more generally. This paper reports on the motives for starting and continuing to learn Welsh, both for learners taking courses and learning informally. It explores how motivations play out in online spaces and in face-to-face communities; how learners connect with each other in online communities and how such communities support learning. The study focussed on salient factors in learners’ practices and experiences especially with respect to informal learning and technology use. As the study took part during the 2020 COVID pandemic, it investigated the impact this had on Welsh learners’ motivation and practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 learners and the interview transcripts subjected to thematic analysis. The paper draws on this interview data to consider how learners planned and supported their learning, revealing the importance of social interaction for both formal and informal learning and the impact of the 2020 Covid pandemic, (when more than one “lockdown” restricted movement and stopped access to face to face courses) on motivation and practices.*

**1 Introduction**

The importance of minority languages is increasingly recognised: they can contain knowledge that could be lost, preserve unique traditions and encapsulate cultural identity. Back in 2007 Turin noted that half of the world’s languages may become extinct in the next century *“… every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology.”* Turin, 2007., p11. Hence, with a loss of a minority language there may also be a loss of knowledge that cannot be regained.

The minority language studied here, Welsh, encapsulates such knowledge, e.g., the old Welsh names of fields, houses and coastal places provide information about past landscape and uses. Welsh has around 538,300 speakers in Wales, 17.8% of the Welsh population, (Census, 2021), with speakers outside Wales too. As minority language speakers are often distributed, there may not be sufficient speakers in a geographical area to provide a language community. Digital spaces may help in maintaining and revitalising minority languages as they can support web-based communities of speakers (Stern, 2017 and Cunliffe, 2019). Learners can be supported in similar ways.

The 2021 census showed a decline in the number of Welsh speakers. Reasons for this decline are that firstly the transmission of the language decreases, as an older generation decides not to speak it to their children. Secondly, speakers move to find work outside the area. Thirdly, non-Welsh speakers move into the Welsh heartlands where Welsh is spoken thus making communities of Welsh speakers harder to maintain. However, some learn Welsh fluently; so encouraging people to learn Welsh could be part of the solution by producing new speakers. The Welsh Government actively promotes the use of Welsh and has a goal through its "Cymraeg 2050" strategy to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050*.* (Welsh Government, 2017 and see latest annual report, 2024).

Relevant developments include a growth in research into using social media for language learning (e.g., Zourou, 2020, Vogiatzis, 2023), and a large increase in online learning and in resources for learning Welsh. The study reported here investigated Welsh learners’ practices by following two groups; one taking online courses and another using the “Say Something In Welsh” app (commonly known as SSIW and discussed later). Both groups used other resources too. Interviews were conducted in autumn 2021, following two COVID lockdown periods, (March - June 2020, and January – July 2021). During the first lockdown many face-to-face courses became available online, affecting what participants could do. The focus of the report is on why participants decided to learn Welsh; why they continued to learn and the implications of the COVID lockdown on their motivation and learning.

**2. Background and literature**

Hubbard (2024) reviewed how technology can support language acquisition, noting the increasing influence of technology from the 1980’s onwards leading to a large range of applications in both teaching and learning languages. He describes a dichotomy between technology use as a tool, e.g. providing access to content, or supporting language production, where the technology acts as a teacher: connecting learners with learning activities and resources. He acknowledges that this dichotomy is not neat, but it is a useful starting point to consider what roles technology may play. In an earlier paper, Hubbard (2009) lists the advantages of technology for language learning. The list includes access, where learners can get resources or experience interactions that would otherwise be difficult or impossible; convenience, allowing learners to study and/or practice across a wider range of times and places, and an increase in motivation from enjoying the learning process. Hubbard (2024) updated this to include authenticity.

Over the last thirty years there has been considerable research activity in “Mobile Assisted Language Learning” (MALL) where learning can take place in different settings and learners may use portable devices such as smartphones and learn “on-the-go”. Kukulska-Hulme, (2024) a leading researcher in this area summarises ways that MALL can help learners, some of which are very relevant to learning minority languages. These include, e.g. supporting learning in authentic, real-life environments, learning collaboratively (Kukulska-Hulme and Viberg, 2018) and interest-led language learning, including heritage languages (Jones, 2015).

2.1 Minority and heritage languages

A **minority language** is spoken by a minority of people in a particular territory and may or may not have official status. Welsh, as a minority language, has official status in Wales. Basque, with a similar number of speakers across areas of Spain and France has regional official status in parts of Spain, but not in France. As noted earlier, Welsh speakers may be thinly geographically spread, and so an online presence is important for learners. Evidence of minority language use in online communities is cited by Carroll, 2008 and Jones, 2015*.*

For some learners Welsh is a heritage language, a language often learned at home as children, or from older generations of the family. However, a heritage language may not be spoken in the family and may not be the official language spoken in that area. Someone may have memories of a heritage language being spoken or sung to them as children but have scant knowledge of the language. They may identify with the language culturally although they do not speak it (Keheller, 2010). Heritage languages are often minority languages (such as Welsh and Gaelic in the UK) but may not be minority languages elsewhere. For example, Turkish is a heritage language in Sweden (Bohnacker, 2023). Reinhardt, 2018, suggests that heritage language speakers and learners can find effective ways of learning and using their language, practising heritage identities, and maintaining connections with their heritage language communities in online communities.

Soria et. al., (2016) have argued for the internet as an essential platform in community building for minority language speakers. Cunliffe, 2019, notes two social media features that might benefit minority languages: providing a new space for the language and connecting geographically dispersed speakers. He also suggests that there may be moderated spaces where using a minority language can be normalised (Cunliffe, 2019, p.458). One Welsh example is the “Galwad Cynnar” Facebook group moderated by BBC Radio Cymru (a Welsh radio station) that accompanies a natural history radio programme with 2800 members (January 2025) where nearly all posts are in Welsh. However, Cunliffe, op. cit. also warns that majority languages can easily dominate online spaces as they do face-to-face.

2.2. Apps and language learning

Digital media have increased opportunities for informal language learning, and resources such as apps and podcasts provide ways of accessing language learning, e.g., “SaySomethingInWelsh”, (https://www.saysomethingin.com/welsh*)* usually referred to as SSIW, is a podcast-based series of courses including a social networked site with emphasis on *speaking* Welsh. Support includes face to face intensive weeks of learning known as ‘boot camps’; a widely used forum; local meetups (many moving online during the Covid pandemic) and the postcard club, discussed later. Typically, there are no tutors or assessment, and the language learning community plays an important role in the forums.

Learning using such apps is usually self-directed learning and likely to be informal. Rosell-Aguilar, 2018, notes that studies of informal social networked sites (SNS’s) for second language learning outside of, or alongside formal learning contexts, have found evidence of their use for learning, practicing, and maintaining home, heritage, and new languages and self-directed learning. Investigating the use of language apps, Rosell-Aguilar (2018)’s survey of over 4,000 learners using the language learning app Busuu found that 80% of respondents lived outside an area where the language being learnt was spoken. His survey analysed the use of language apps for informal learning, an area often neglected in the literature. However, increasingly the distinction between informal and other forms of learning is being eroded, as Dressman (2020) notes.

Rosell-Aguilar, 2018, op. cit., found that language learning apps (e.g., Busuu, DuoLingo and SSIW) are often used by strategic self-directed learners. Around a quarter of Rosell-Aguilar’s participants mixed informal and formal learning. This mix of resource use was found in the author’s previous study of Welsh learners (Jones, 2015) and in a larger study of distance study language learners (Demouy et. al. 2016). So, there seems to be a reasonable number of self-directed learners who learn autonomously.

**2.3 What motivates language learning?**

Why do people choose to learn languages? The social nature of language learning was noted by Trosset, who studied Welsh learners back in 1986: ‘...*There are many aspects of language learning that exist ... in the social relationships developed between the learners and the members of the speech community which they seek to enter’* (Trosset, 1986, p.165).

The literature on what motivates language learning reflects several shifts in how motivation has been theorised over time. One shift is to a more sociocultural perspective, where learning is also “situated in a certain social and cultural setting, at a particular time, and with specific individuals interacting as participants” (Oxford 2003, p.276). Newcombe, 2007, in studying Welsh learners also notes the increasing emphasis on a more situated approach.

Ryan and Deci (2009)’s self-determination theory (SDT) recognises three universal basic human needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the latter being the social element. This has been an influential (psychological) approach where motivation can be extrinsic, when externally rewarded, e.g., where the language is needed for employment; or intrinsic, when the activity is inherently interesting or enjoyable. Here the enjoyable nature of the activity and social interactions can sustain high levels of intrinsic motivation.

The most widely influential theory of motivation specifically for language learning is Dӧrnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie. 2017). The central concept is the ideal L2 self, where the individual imagines her future self, speaking the target language. This approach has been criticised as it was developed in contexts where learners may have had little or no contact with native speakers and does not account for learners’ personalised reasons for learning a language. Perhaps more important is its uncomfortable fit with our contemporary multilingual and multicultural world, as it assumes that learners learn one language at a time. So, it is widely argued (see, e.g. Flynn and Harris, 2016 and Nakumara, 2019) that the theoretical frameworks of language learning motivation now need reconsideration, partly because of our multicultural, multilingual world; because of their psychological orientation and because they often draw on learning English only rather than including learning other languages.

Flynn and Harris (2016) developed a different motivational categorisation as part of their investigation into motivation in adults learning Irish, another UK Celtic language. Using qualitative individual and focus interviews they employed thematic analysis and developed 5 motivational categories: 1) integratively motivated: reflecting a desire to become part of the target language community (2) instrumentally motivated; where the motivation is pragmatic e.g. learning a language needed for a job (3) intrinsically motivated: i.e. by the inherently interesting or enjoyable qualities of an activity; (4) extrinsically motivated where learners are driven by external factors such as rewards and (5) socioculturally motivated - this category includes issues surrounding the learner’s cultural background, linguistic heritage and personal identity and so would include heritage language learners.

Newcombe (2007) reported that learners in her study (in South Wales) wanted to become part of the target language community, and in line with other studies, motivation fluctuated. Often intrinsic motivation was also present.

The contexts for Welsh learner research vary considerably. Banegas and Roberts (2020) studied Welsh learners in Patagonia, where Welsh settlers migrated in the 19th century, partly to preserve the Welsh language. The Welsh speaking communities left are currently limited, but there has been some revival. Not surprisingly many of Banegas and Roberts’ participants had cultural reasons for learning Welsh. Banegas and Roberts used Dörnyei’s L2 framework in their study of Patagonian learners. They conclude that the Welsh language learners were motivated by the positive classroom atmosphere, their success in learning, and learner collaboration*.* Whether Welsh was a heritage language in their family or not, participants were driven by contributing to the maintenance of Welsh and its revitalisation.

Finally, Rosiak (2023) discusses motivations for learning Welsh by Polish post-2004 migrants to Wales noting the emergence of *“themes of social access, belonging to social circles and integrating with local communities”* (Rosiak, 2023, p.41) suggesting an integrative motivation. This also played a significant role in motivating the students learning Irish in Flynn and Harris’s (2016) study. So, a range of motivations have been found in studies of Welsh learners, and an integrative motive, a desire to become part of the target language community, is a feature of many. Studying learners’ motivations in the present study enabled an investigation of how motivations apply in a digital context.

Research questions

1 Why did the participants decide to learn Welsh and to continue their learning?

2. What were the most important factors in learners’ practices and experiences especially with respect to informal learning and technology use?

3. What impact did the COVID pandemic have on Welsh learners’ motivation and practices since the start of the pandemic?

**3 Methods and participants**

The research protocol for the study was considered by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee and was given a favourable opinion, reference number 4056/Jones.

Interviews were used to study learners’ practices at various stages of learning Welsh (although there were no complete beginners). They were chosen as the research aimed to uncover practices and this method allowed their exploration. The interview questions were partly based on those used in the author’s previous research (Jones, 2015) and a related study (Demouy, Kan, Eardley and Kukulska-Hulme, 2013) and updated to apply to the context of the covid pandemic and the participants’ contexts. Semi-structured interviews were employed, to allow some flexibility to ask questions about the participants' contexts.

Volunteer participants were recruited from two sources. The first is a podcast-based series of courses called “SaySomethingInWelsh”, SSIW, where the emphasis is on *speaking* Welsh, and (except during the pandemic), support includes face to face intensive week-long learning: ‘boot camps’. SSIW includes a widely used forum, local meetups (many moved online during Covid) and the postcard club (discussed later). The CEO of SSIW gave permission for the author to ask for volunteers by posting in the forum. Ten people responded and eight were invited to be interviewed to provide learners at different stages. Seven participants agreed and were interviewed via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or by phone, according to participants’ preferences. The interviews lasted from around 40 to 90 minutes.

The second group were taking formal courses via *The National Centre for Learning Welsh*, which provides adult Welsh courses throughout Wales at all levels using the digital “Learn Welsh” platform (<https://learnwelsh.cymru>) sponsored by the Welsh government. There is a national curriculum, and a progression of courses mapped to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).  Contact was made with the Director of Teaching and Learning, to recruit participants. Of the 10 participants suggested, 7 were finally interviewed, giving 14 participants in total. As far as possible there was a mix of foundation, intermediate and higher-level learners.

In the interviews participants were asked about their desire to learn Welsh; their use of digital devices and technologies to support their learning; their experience of informal learning, how they organised and supported it, and their experience of learning during Covid. Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss their experiences of learning Welsh and in one interview, as time ran out, and the participant wished to continue, a second interview was carried out. A follow up thank you email asked whether they wished to add anything, and a few wrote more about their experiences, e.g., one person had visited Wales and wrote about her trip (in Welsh) and another had written a report for an online magazine. Gina had kept a learning journal from the beginning and made this available to the researcher. Most of the interviews were in English but participants were given a choice and some more advanced learners on the formal course chose to be interviewed in Welsh.

A summary of participants is in Table 1 on page 7. Note that in the SSIW course (Say Something in Welsh, see above) the highest level is close to the intermediate level for Learn Welsh courses. Most participants also used other courses such as Duolingo at times. The age range of participants ranged from one in his twenties to several who were retired.

The different levels for the Learn Welsh courses are: Mynediad (Entry), Foundation, (Sylfaen), Canolradd (Intermediate), Uwch (Higher) and Gloywi. The term Gloywi is hard to translate: learners at this level are fairly fluent but seeking further improvement to their language skills. There are two levels of the Higher course: 1 and 2.

U3A refers to University of the Third Age which provides interest courses for adults in the UK who are no longer in paid work. Interviewees were mainly interviewed in English, but four participants were interviewed in Welsh as noted in the column providing further language information which also notes participants’ experience of other languages.

Table 1: Summary of participants, level, course and other relevant information. Participants were interviewed in English unless otherwise stated.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pseudonym | Nationality | Level etc | Course\* | Further language information |
| 1 | Donna  | Welsh |  Higher level 1 | SSIW LearnWelsh | Bit of Arabic |
| 2 | Robert | English; Welsh background | Higher level 2 | SSIWLearnWelsh | German; some Latin and Greek |
| 3 | Gina | Italian | Higher level 1 | SSIWLearnWelsh | English, French |
| 4 | Mike | Welsh |  Gloywi | LearnWelsh | Interviewed in Welsh |
| 5 | Amy | American | LearnWelsh Foundation  | SSIW LearnWelsh | Knowledge of several languages |
| 6 | Joy | English | LearnWelsh Foundation  | SSIW LearnWelsh | German |
| 7 | Jack  | Welsh | Intermediate | U3A/SSIW | Some French  |
| 8 | Freda  | English | LearnWelsh foundation  | SSIW plus | FrenchSpanish  |
| 9 | Sue  | Welsh |  Gloywi | LearnWelsh | Interviewed in Welsh |
| 10 | Jeremy | English | Higher level 1 | LearnWelsh | Bilingual German |
| 11 | Jane (Judi) | English | Gloywi | LearnWelsh  | Interviewed in Welsh |
| 12 | Louise  | English | Intermediate | LearnWelsh |  |
| 13 | Bonny | Welsh | Intermediate | LearnWelsh |  |
| 14 | Abby | Welsh | Gloywi | LearnWelsh | Interviewed in Welsh |

**4. Analysis and findings**

A thematic approach was used for analysing the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022) where the transcripts were scrutinised for emerging categories, producing a long list for re-evaluation and reduction to provide a smaller number of motivational themes. These themes were: 1) goal driven; 2) lockdown; 3) confidence - both as a motivator and de-motivator; 4) social; 5) identity; 6) family/community (including heritage) 7) intrinsic; 8) enjoyment of and interest in languages and finally 9) curiosity. However, the last two motives were identified by only 4 participants.

It was decided that it was worth considering Flynn and Harris’s motivational categories which were derived from a study of learning another UK Celtic minority language and these are discussed next. Table 2 shows how the participants’ motivations mapped onto these categories: 1) integrational motivation: reflecting a desire to become part of the target language community; 2) instrumental motivation; where the motivation is pragmatic e.g. learning a language needed for a job; 3) intrinsic motivation: i.e. the inherently interesting or enjoyable qualities of an activity; 4) extrinsic motivation where learners are driven by external factors such as rewards and finally sociocultural motivation – relating to cultural background, linguistic heritage and personal identity.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Type of motivation | Integrational motivation | Instrumental motivation | Intrinsic motivation | Extrinsic motivation | Sociocultural motivation |
| No. of participants showing this type of motivation | 5  | 0 – although one participant wanted to use Welsh for future work | 7 participants | 2 | 6 |

Some of these categories are not appropriate for these participants who are not looking for work requiring the language, and neither are many motivated by external factors – although two were motivated by the gaming nature of the app. The first category, integrational motivation: reflecting a desire to become part of the target language community, was not an initial motivation for many, but it was the motivation for 4 participants, Sue, Jame, Bonny and Jonny, although not always the initial one. Sue wanted to return Welsh to being the language of the household. Jane expressed it differently as “time for me”. Bonny had always wanted to learn Welsh, and Jonny had moved in with his Welsh speaking partner so wanted to be able to speak to her in her mother tongue.

Sue also fitted the category of sociocultural motivation as she was also motivated by Welsh as a heritage language and returning the language to the family by learning the language and addressing the gap of “missing out”. Sue’s father’s family stopped speaking Welsh in the household, but Welsh was still spoken outside the house and by older family members. So, Sue often heard the language and felt excluded: *(at) a family wedding the older members ... spoke Welsh. I was sent to a Welsh chapel where the family went. So I was always on the outskirts of Welsh. I (felt) I was missing out. I didn’t want ... the same situation for my children so I sent them to a Welsh school*”

After retiring she learnt Welsh and changed the language of the household. Welsh became an important part of her identity. *I feel more like a Welsh speaker than a learner.* Equally, as well as wanting to be part of the Welsh community there was a strong sociocultural motivation here, particularly within the context of her family.

Jane started learning Welsh once her children had grown up. Having moved to Wales from England she had no initial interest in Welsh; then her eldest daughter did a Welsh degree and her youngest learnt Welsh to a high standard. She decided to enroll in an intensive course during retirement:*I decided it was time for me to to make the effort and it is the best thing I have ever done.* She belongs to Welsh communities such as *Merched y Wawr,* (MyW), (a little like the UK Women’s Institute) and had agreed to be its treasurer *“so I am going to have to concentrate on more formal language”.* She had also been interviewed on welsh radio, talking about changing the family language. She has also changed the language she uses with friends (from English to Welsh) and had started to teach Welsh too.

Bonny always wanted to learn Welsh and realised how little she was enjoyed her job during the Covid lockdown so took a career break and also enrolled in an intensive Welsh course. The thriving Welsh speaking community in her village helped consierably and she has successfully switched languages with friends: *One of the Welsh speakers said oh how is your Welsh coming along (in English) and I replied in Welsh and said Oh …really well and they said oh the last time I spoke to you, you couldn’t speak Welsh.*

These participants are invested in being part of the Welsh community, but this was not necessarily their first motivation. Others, like Freda, expressed their desire to be part of such a community once they had made considerable progress: the most important motivators for her are social and cultural, and she wanted to be fluent within five years.

The next category is intrinsic motivation., where learning Welsh is inherently interesting and enjoyable. This applied to many participants but was not always the initial motivation. E.g. Gina, Amy and Freda cited their curiosity. Gina wanted to understand the words of a song she had heard and liked, and Freda wanted to know how to pronounce Welsh town names.

Table 3: Initial reasons for learning Welsh

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gina | Amy | Freda  | Joy | Laura | Jack | Robert |
| Curiosity. To understand words of a song she really liked  | Curiosity: lived close to where Welsh settlers had lived | Curiosity: to know how to pronounce Welsh town names | To cope with lockdown  | Interest from childhood.Moved to Wales | Identity | Intellectual challenge identity and usefulness |
| Sue | Jane | Bonny | Jonny | Abby | Mike | Donna |
| HeritageWanted to return Welsh to her family | After her daughter’s graduation decided she wanted to learn. | Always wanted to learn Welsh. Opportunity during Covid  | Moved in with Welsh speaking partner | Her son suggested she try SSIW | To help his daughter  | Identity  |

*4.1 Discussion: Why learn Welsh?*

Four portrait sketches are provided in the appendix which illustrate learners’ motivations and how they engaged in both online and face to face communities. The reasons for learning were very varied and sometimes surprising as some participants had *no* interest to start with yet ended up being “hooked” and with considerable language skills. The initial reasons for each participant are summarised briefly in table 3 above whilst table 4 lists all the motivation themes for each participant that emerged from the analysis.

Table 4: Motivation themes for each participant

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gina | Amy | Freda  | Joy | Laura | Jack | Robert |
| Goal drivenCuriositySocialEnjoyment | Curiosity Cultural language interestAvailability | CuriosityInterest in languagesSocialCulturalEnjoymentGoal driven | SocialTo cope with lockdown Goal driven Gaming Accessibility | Interest from childhoodGaming Interest in languages | IdentityGoal driven | Intellectual exerciseIdentityUsefulnessSocial |
| Sue | Jane | Bonny | Jonny | Abby | Mike | Donna |
| HeritageIdentity | “Time for me”Family and supportGoal driven  | SocialGoal drivenInstrumentalInterest in languages | SocialMoved in with Welsh speaking partner | Family | family socialgoal driven | Identity |

Returning to Flynn and Harris’s categories, very few participants expressed any instrumental motivation, nor extrinsic motivation, although two enjoyed and were motivated by the gaming aspects of the Duolingo app. However, the context for the Irish learners was different, with some jobs that the learners might have interest in, requiring skills in Irish.

Many factors come together in the learners’ stories. The 5th category, sociocultural motivation, was strongly represented and included heritage language learners. As with the Irish learners however, not all the participants whose motivations were sociocultural were Welsh. Jane is English but changed her family’s language to Welsh having lived in Wales for 34 years. Jane adopted a Welsh identity and integrated into the Welsh community.

As we saw above, Welsh was spoken in Sue’s family in the past and she revived it in the family*.* Children and grandchildren played a strong role for other participants too, e.g. Mike started to learn Welsh to help his daughter with her Welsh learning, Jonny moved in with a Welsh speaking partner and Abby acted on her son’s suggestion to learn Welsh using SSIW.

Identity was a strong factor too for Jack, Robert, Mike and Donna, who were Welsh or had Welsh roots. Some participants started learning during retirement when they had more time. Two participants in the US and in Italy (Gina and Amy) had no associations with Wales, but a strong curiosity about the language. Two participants had moved to Wales and were interested in languages. The initial motive for Freda (living close to Wales) was wanting to know how to pronounce a Welsh town name and her interest in learning Welsh quickly grew to be a passion that she spent much time on.

Some participants had more time available as they worked from home, or did not work during the Covid lockdown, and resources became available online. For two participants learning Welsh provided a positive activity during lockdown but for others the effect was negative. They lost the opportunity to meet other learners for coffee and to have incidental conversations during their classes. Sue spoke of missing the informal Welsh conversations when the course went online, and Donna struggled to use the technology for her online courses which she related to her dyscalculia diagnosis:

*… there is the printing out, ordering things and working out where we are and … sometimes …they say share your screen and I say look I can’t do that.* (When registering)*….it … sends you the form asking (about) disabilities and I …fill it in with dyslexia, dyspraxia dyscalculia…*.*I have a lot of trouble usually joining (*Zoom)*… I need to allow myself 20 minutes before the course. But usually I manage it in the end.*

Bonny’s story illustrates the power of an intensive course and support of an inspiring tutor and the role of friends and community, but also the problems when the teaching is not so inspiring. She is willing to use her Welsh and make good use of opportunities. She has become part of her local Welsh community and is the only participant to put any emphasis on *putting the language to good use.*

The lockdown period, not surprisingly, was salient. For some, like Freda, it provided time to learn Welsh; for Sue it disrupted the social network and led to isolation; and for Gina, goals changed when she could not travel to Wales. Having moved to Wales with a friend to avoid being isolated in London when lockdown hit Joy was looking for something productive to do and found cheap and free resources. Others such as Amy, in the USA, could now do formal Welsh learning courses as they were online.

The Covid lockdown period, when the participants were learning, involved using online spaces for Welsh. These courses worked well for nearly all participants; the exception being Donna who found using technology very challenging. In addition to courses, online spaces included informal areas such as the SSIW forums and Facebook groups. The literature (e.g., Carroll, 2008, and Cunliffe, 2019) had suggested that online spaces could support heritage and minority languages, and this was the case for many participants, particularly those who started as self-directed, autonomous learners. For some, online spaces were combined with face-to-face communities. Often these were learner communities, as for Freda’s, but they also included more traditional Welsh communities, as Bonny found. Some learners who mainly used online spaces as they lived far from Wales, visited Wales, and conducted those visits through Welsh. The existence of so many Welsh spaces and activities, whether online or face-to-face, such as those provided by Menter yr Iaith, which provides opportunities to use Welsh every day within communities partly reflects the Welsh government’s investment, as does the number of online courses (and related resources) available. The online courses provided an opportunity for learners who could not have attended face-to-face courses, and several courses have continued online.

**Conclusions**

Most participants had several motives - and this multiplicity of motivations was something that Flynn and Harris (2016) also found in studying Irish adult learners. For some participants, small, quite fragile initial “hooks” led to serious interest and motivation. Gina, e.g., had not encountered Welsh until she heard and became very interested in a contemporary song. This initial curiosity motivated her to start learning independently and then to continue her language journey very successfully. Similarly, Freda wanted to learn how to pronounce the name of a town and continued to become a passionate learner. Both these participants enjoyed languages and for Freda, the lockdown period was significant, as she couldn’t engage in her usual activities. Joy was looking for something to do during lockdown and had moved to Wales. Amy, from the US, found it hard to say what exactly had motivated her beyond living near a very beautiful area where Welsh migrants had settled, but had a long-standing interest in languages and considerable experience of language learning.

*Online and face to face spaces*Online spaces were used extensively by participants (see, e.g. the portrait sketches for Gina and Freda in the appendix,) supporting the claim that such spaces can support heritage and minority languages, and this was the case for many participants. However, face to face communities played a large role too, e.g. Amy, Freda, and Gina, who connected with others online, all visited Wales. For Freda it was a short distance, and she took part in activities such as walks and lunches, using her Welsh, whilst Amy and Gina arranged trips from the US and Italy. The social nature of language was very important for most participants and Freda gives a good account of how meeting and communicating with people motivated her.

*Lockdown*The Covid pandemic lockdown periods were an important factor. Lockdown was an enabler for some participants (like Amy), as courses moved online, and more time became available but it led to isolation for some (e.g. Sue) who missed the incidental sociability that happened during face to face classes and over coffee. This period led to Bonny reflecting on her life and a decision to leave her job and learn Welsh.

*Changing the language at home*Two participants successfully changed the language of their homes. Sue brought Welsh back into the family, after it had been abandoned two generations previously, whilst interestingly and ironically Jane was English (her husband was Welsh) but changed the family language to Welsh and decided to only speak Welsh with her granddaughters.

*Sociability*Finally, the social nature of language, and sociability in general, was very important for most participants and Freda (portrait 3) gives a good account of how meeting and communicating with people motivated her. Some participants took intensive courses which worked very well for them and led to the development of friendships which were important to them in learning and using Welsh.

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**Appendix: short portraits of 4 learners**

This appendix provides portraits of 4 learners, illustrating different backgrounds, motivations, and practices in learning Welsh

**Portrait 1: Gina: goal-driven; intrinsic; social; curiosity.**

*This portrait has been selected because Gina lived in Italy, came across Welsh by accident, became passionate about Welsh and learnt Welsh to a high standard*

Gina was Italian, living in Italy and became interested in Welsh through music, having not realised the language existed: *“I was not aware (Welsh) was a living language … until I heard this record (by)… a band called Datblygu and realised (it was) a (modern) language and … modern. … I really liked it …(and) I wanted to find out what they were saying and got curious about that ….”*

Ten years later, working on a music project, she listened to the band again. By then Duolingo Welsh courses and SSIW were available. The social context was important: “*… I found SSIW and .. this social setting, the forum that got me into meeting actual people in Wales and then I got carried away”.*

She joined a Welsh online community on the SSIW forum and contrasted this with learning English at school, which she had found boring. As she enjoyed modern English music she had persisted with self-driven learning and staying with an English family enabled a language breakthrough. Welsh was the first language she had learnt informally and that affected her enjoyment: *“the previous (languages) were in a formal setting and I didn’t enjoy it .. but with Welsh it started in a different way...though I think the previous experience has helped.”*

She met others through a Welsh learners’ Facebook group and the SSIW forum and developed a large network of people that she talks to online. Her informal learning is driven by changing goals, e.g. she decided to finish the SSIW course by the end of her vacation. A goal to visit Wales within 6 months led to an emphasis on speaking and when the pandemic prevented this, she developed a new goal of taking an exam. She prefers to learn independently but had recently joined a Learnwelsh course which she appreciated. She had several people with whom she could speak Welsh.

Through her social network she arranged a 3 week visit to Wales and kept a learning journal whilst there which revealed that “*Keeping it fun and enjoyable was important”.*

There was more than one motivation here with strong elements of intrinsic motivation where she finds the activity itself enjoyable and fun: *“it is usually when I have a motivation from within; …I am always attracted by the sound of it and then the social aspect and because I got curious about CELTIC languages in general”*

There is also evidence of goal directed activities and a clear preference for informal learning. However, since the interview she has gone on to successfully complete several courses and reach a high level.

**Portrait 2: Sue; Returning Welsh to the family; social, identity, family, lockdown***This portrait illustrates a socio-cultural motivation and returning Welsh to a family that had stopped speaking the language.*

Sue’s father’s family stopped speaking Welsh at home, but Welsh was still spoken outside the house and by older family members:” *(at) a family wedding the older members ... spoke Welsh. I was sent to a Welsh chapel where the family went. So I was always on the outskirts of Welsh. I (felt) I was missing out. I didn’t want ... the same situation for my children so I sent them to a Welsh school*”

After retiring she learnt Welsh, and changed the language of the household and Welsh became important to her identity. “*I feel more like a Welsh speaker than a learner.”*

*“I retired early 8 years ago. I went to Welsh lessons.., twice a week for three hours. .I was very fired up. My daughter married a Cornish man but was determined to speak Welsh with the children (and she did). It has been a journey in a way – not finished yet.”*

The social element was very important, but opportunities were lost during lockdown:

*“Doing the intensive course I made good friends; we’d have coffee and speak Welsh - a good way to practise ... without ...pressure. That opportunity for speaking informally went when we started using zoom...that’s what I missed, that was the biggest problem*.”

Digital spaces became crucial but she felt isolated: “*I did keep up with some... friends – informal chats over zoom ... but the breaks between Welsh conversations …became longer - but without technology there would have been none. It was a period when I felt cut off.”*

Her language journey continues: “*I am not that confident yet though I took part in a welsh radio programme about recovering language in the family- talking for 10 minutes.”*

She said: *I have to plan my informal learning – at the moment I am concentrating on writing; I had a period of having Welsh radio on – and now can underatand nearly everything. (I’m) trying to live my life through Welsh so the plans change from time to time.*

Not everyone in the family speaks Welsh: *but with family members who do speak Welsh Welsh is the language.* Her husband (English) can now understand Welsh.

She continues to do advanced level classes and benefits from her tutor’s support, who provides feedback on her writing and partners her for speaking practice.

She is motivated by Welsh as a heritage language, the importance of family and returning the language to the family by learning and using the language and addressing the gap of “missing out”. Also we see goal setting; how important her friendship groups became for her use of Welsh and the disruption that the lockdown caused.

**Portrait 3: Freda: curious; intrinsic; social; interest in languages; goal driven.***This illustrates the growth of a passionate love of Welsh from no initial connections.*

Freda, English, is retired and lives near Wales. Her initial motivation was learning how to pronounce a name. During lockdown, with travel restricted, she had time to learn Welsh: *“I realised I was not pronouncing Dolgellau properly, then lockdown happened. I like languages; I have Wales next door and then I fell in love with (Welsh)”.* She found resources and activities including DuoLingo; SSIW; YouTube resources, children’s books and FaceBook groups leading to interactions with other learners. Her most important motivators are social and cultural. She has made friends; travelled and learnt about Welsh culture. She met Coral through the postcard club (see below) and now talks Welsh with her regularly and shares resources. :

*“What I’ve found fabulous … are the Facebook groups. I mostly use “Dwi’n dysgu Cymraeg” (I’m learning Welsh) …. And I’ll contribute … I get so much from them. So*…*this (illustration in a children’s book)… is like flashcards for grownups. ..I posted a picture .. and asked – in Welsh … – whether anyone fancies a translation?”*

*There are 300* (*postcard club*) *members so I have ... sent Welsh postcards... to members in Japan, Moscow (etc)... you send one a month... so much fun, I sent 16 ...and (received) ... fascinating ones with ...amazing vocabularies and colloquialisms and my breadth of language has deepened but (also) some of them I sent (to people) who (live close by) and I thought we might ...meet and chat in Welsh. One ... who came back immediately was Coral...*

Freda told Coral about *Menter Iaith[[1]](#footnote-1)* activities, e.g. lunches and walks but Coral lived too far away: *so I set up a (local meeting)... and met someone in the same village through the FB forums.* “ *So now I am getting a social experience; satisfying travel; evolving motivations...social interaction; it’s huge. I am meeting people I would not have met (otherwise)....The more one’s language develops... the more people you meet, you need more vocabulary. (In) Lockdown ... I couldn’t see my family or travel ... What I like to do is learn stuff and what I ...love is languages . Perfect opportunity to learn Welsh. Evolving motivation, went from pronounciation - ..: (to) learn phrases, then DuoLingo, so compelling . ...It was entertaining and developmental. ...*

Her goal is fluency in 5 years*... (so) I can watch whatever’s on television ....I want to be able to meet people and to understand them...I couldn’t imagine not having Welsh in my life because it’s so lovely and now I’m increasingly interested in the literature; in the music.. It is introducing me to different people, music: it is key to so much else....*

Intrinsic motivation is strong; Freda gets enormous enjoyment from her learning and social interactions. She notes how her motivations evolve and goals change and has successfully joined local Welsh communities, both on and off line.

**Portrait 4: Bonny: social; goal driven; instrumental; interest in languages***This illustrates the power of an intensive course, an inspiring tutor and supportive community.*

Bonny, who is Welsh, started learning during the Covid lockdown: *I was in a job I wasn’t enjoying. “ I worked from home…and lockdown…got me thinking I definitely don’t want to do this job, but I’ve always wanted to learn Welsh. I decided to quit my job, take a career break, and start an intensive course.*  *Where I live …there is Welsh everywhere … … neighbours and friends were so encouraging, and that made me think I can put it to good use… apply it to a job … or at least chat to neighbours and friends.”*

*I did … a …crash course 9 hours a week. I did two exams in May* *and...that is exactly what I wanted to achieve; it is incredible.*

In her new job *“managing volunteers who (are) befriending … over fifties who are isolated”,* she wanted to use her Welsh:*”…Wouldn’t it be wonderful to speak to an older person in Welsh … but I haven’t found any yet.* Once working, she started a course with a new tutor but and missed the friendship of her previous classmates: “*I’m very very bored and I really wanted to keep that camaraderie: there was such a small group and it was really wonderful, and it is at a very different pace it is really really s-l-o-w”.*

She considered continuing informally: *I am tempted to do the course myself .. We’ve got a community garden …I usually go down on Thursday mornings and help them. They all speak Welsh and are so patient with me; they are wonderful; all in their seventies or eighties. We do an hour and have … cake ...and then another hour and are speaking Welsh the whole time and I am immersed in it.* She was conflicted between taking a course and continuing to learn informally supported by her previous tutor: *I feel like I am a Welsh speaker now. But I feel I’m not ready to go into the big wide world and use it, I feel like I need more of that structure.*

Her experience highlights the importance of the tutorbut she also sorely missed her previous classmates and tutor, J: *I think I am still bereft that I haven’t got J* although she continues to have Welsh conversations online with one of her previous colleagues.

She has successfully switched languages: *One of the Welsh speakers said “oh how is your Welsh coming along (in English) and I replied in Welsh and said Oh …really well and they said oh the last time I spoke to you, you couldn’t speak Welsh, …* *Because they’re friends of mine already that I had spoken in English to … I don’t care that I’m making mistakes – they get the gist of what I am saying.”*

Bonny’s story not only shows the benefit of an intensive course, an inspiring tutor and the role of friends and community, but also the problems when the teaching is not so inspiring. She is willing to use her Welsh and make good use of opportunities. She has become part of her local Welsh community and is the only participant to put any emphasis on *putting the language to good use.*

1. **Menter Iaith**  (Language Initiative) is a community-based organisation which works to raise the profile of the [Welsh language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_language) in a specific area. Each local  group receives a basic grant from the [Welsh Language Board](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_Language_Board), and financial support from other sources, to work with individuals, organisations, and local business to promote the use of Welsh in its area. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)