

Imperfect is Perfect: Top Tips for Welsh language Learners



Words and Photography by Jen Abell

@diffmustbetheplace on Instagram. Joy of joys, they wanted to commission a Welsh language self-guided tour of my garden. When I started filming, I was frustrated by how rusty my Welsh was. My frustration didn't help. I couldn't refocus my energy on learning until I'd diverted it from disappointment. Acceptance is key.

Dydd Gwyl Dewi hapus i chi! Fingers crossed we'll be dusting our daffodils and donning our dragons for a St David's Day Parade in 2022. For the record, I am not a Welsh teacher. I'm not even a teacher. But I am a five-year invested, sporadically dedicated Welsh language learner. Lockdown induced Welsh learning has given me a flurry of online practice requests from friends. I'm excited for Wales. Where would our language be without our precious fledgeling learners? It's not easy, but with a bit of discipline and consistency, it becomes one of the most useful, energising and perspective expanding skills you'll ever learn. May these tips help you channel Spring's energy into achieving your learning goals:

Use what you've got.

If your sentence needs ten words and you have three in Welsh, that's ok! That's how it starts. Speak, tweet, write, practice, celebrate and savour those three words. Shout them from the rooftops, whisper them to your baby. Pepper your English with them. Whatever gets them moving from your head to your mouth is the right learning technique for you.

Accept where you are.

If you've taken a break in your learning practice, don't punish yourself. It's ok to go back two steps before taking three forward. I lost a lot of my vocabulary over lockdown. I live with an English speaker and only saw Welsh-speaking friends a couple of times for a brew last Summer. Garddio a Mwy got in touch after seeing my bi-lingual garden photography project

Live your life in Welsh.

This one's hard and requires discipline. I quickly became able to spend entire weekends in Welsh, baffling my friends and classmates. The secret to this kickstart is: I committed to media swaps during my first year of study. English language radio was out, Welsh was in. That was tough. I couldn't understand where words started and ended, let alone what they represented. My knowledge of current affairs took a nosedive! But you get to know which presenters are clearer (Shan Cothi- diolch!) and slowly patterns emerge. Then you understand keywords. And on it goes. And yes, English language books are out, Welsh are in. This was PAINFUL (poenus) for me. I happily average four books a month in English so spending time reading about 'red umbrellas', 'spot the dog' and other marvels at my learning level was excruciating. But recognising leaps in my knowledge and growth in the time I could spend in Welsh made it completely worthwhile. And yup, you got it: Eastenders is out, Pobol y Cwm is in.

Imperfect is perfect.

Learning vocabulary and attending lessons isn't enough. You have to start speaking. Today. Even if it's with your cat. But ultimately your learning capacity has a ceiling. If trying to remember the subject, the tense and the conjunctive is difficult, don't pressure yourself to perfect genders and mutations immediately too. Sorry not sorry purists, this is essential. We understand you whether you mutate or not. And that's what language is about right, understanding each



other? You have a chance of learning Welsh if you use Welsh. You don't if perfectionism keeps your lips sealed. I made a conscious decision not to worry about mutations when I began learning. I started speaking quicker than classmates who didn't.

Get Resourceful.

App Geiraduron, Duolingo, podcasts, Welsh language music, books from charity shops. For a 'minority language', we're spoilt by free, inexpensive and easy to access learning resources.

Experiment and find what works for you. Join 'Welsh learners/dysgwyr Cymraeg' on Facebook and follow @cymraeg on Twitter. Sophie on @welsh.notebook on Instagram is a brilliant source of inspiration and always happy to chat with new learners. You don't have to wait until you can afford a course to start using Welsh.

Allot time and stick to it.

Achieving learning goals takes time. You'll need to actively plan this into your week. The only regular time I had to myself was Sunday mornings when I started, so this became Welsh language time. The snag here is that hangovers are a no-no if I want to learn (read- do) anything so I had to toss the tippie on Saturday nights. Learning a language as an adult is a challenge, but you want to get there right? You may need to change your routine, too.

This is all you.

People will be delighted to practice with you. They'll be happy to answer questions too. But you have to learn the vocabulary and sentence structures to have something to practice in the first place. That is all you, get to work.

Be brave.

It takes a Dragonheart to open your mouth and release thoughts in a language you're not confident in. Let alone one that you don't have to speak. You don't have to speak Welsh in Wales, it takes effort. And for learners, it takes courage too. Focus on your motivation when your courage falters and pat yourself enthusiastically on the back when you manage it. Anhygoell!

Laugh at yourself. A lot.

It took me a minute to understand why the bartender I was speaking with turned cherry red. Once I realised I'd asked for sex, instead of ice, it became fairly understandable. Rhyw/rhew, you can see how that happened... We had a giggle (and nothing else!) once my inner monologue flagged my error. I still laugh at it now. Mistakes are funny, not scary. Try to remember that.

Second language use engages different parts of the brain and even positively affects memory and executive function. Alternative pathways created through multi-language use and the skill required to switch between the two (or more) can even slow cognitive decline in adults. Talk about an incentive! You may be surprised by what it can do for your relationships too. Conversational chemistry changes in a different language. I have close friends in Welsh that I was never close with in English. What a gift. In my experience, a new language gives a new perspective. And a different perspective, at any age, can be life changing. Pob lwc I chi gyd and remember; imperfect is perfect.

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(Photos: St David's Day Parade 2018, Cardiff)

