Immersion Education Policy and Governance in Japan and Wales

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Abstract

This article synthesises a comparative analysis of primary language immersion policy frameworks in Tokyo and Wales, drawing on fieldwork conducted by a Torfaen County Borough Council delegation in October 2025 and a review of policy documents, inspection frameworks, and scholarly literature. It examines governance arrangements, strategic intent, evaluation mechanisms, stakeholder roles, and sociolinguistic drivers shaping immersion provision. Tokyo's dual-tiered governance (the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education and ward-level Boards) enables local innovation but produces uneven access and variable evaluation practices. Wales embeds immersion within a statutory, rights-based architecture (Cymraeg 2050; WESPs) supported by Estyn inspection and systematic planning, producing greater coherence and accountability. The article identifies reciprocal lessons for both systems and offers targeted recommendations to strengthen equity, professional learning, and community-based language use.

Introduction

Language immersion in primary education is a policy instrument with both pedagogical and sociolinguistic aims: to develop bilingual competence, support minority-language revitalisation, and prepare learners for globalised societies. The Project Tokyo delegation comprised local authority officers, immersion specialists, and school leaders who engaged with Tokyo education officials, visited immersion settings, and explored implications for Welsh-medium practice.

The analysis situates Tokyo and Wales at different points on a governance continuum. Wales pursues a statutory, nationally coordinated immersion strategy designed to revitalise Welsh as a community language. Tokyo operates within Japan's centralised national framework but exhibits metropolitan-level flexibility that has enabled experimental immersion-style provision. This contrast offers a productive basis for comparative inquiry: what governance arrangements, evaluation mechanisms, and stakeholder practices best support equitable, high-quality immersion at scale?

This article proceeds as follows: the literature review summarises key theoretical and empirical work on immersion governance, evaluation, and sociolinguistic drivers. The following sections then examine (1) governance and policy architecture in Tokyo, (2) Wales's statutory immersion system and inspection regime, and (3) comparative evaluation and pedagogical implications.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Immersion Education

Immersion pedagogy is grounded in second-language acquisition theory and bilingual education scholarship. Cummins' threshold and interdependence hypotheses emphasise the cognitive and academic benefits of strong development in a first language for subsequent second-language attainment (Cummins, 1979; Cummins, 2000). Additive bilingualism frameworks argue that valuing both languages supports identity formation and academic outcomes (Baker, 2011). Empirical reviews indicate that well-resourced immersion programmes can yield rapid oral fluency and comparable academic achievement over time (Genesee, 2004; Lindholm-Leary, 2012).

Governance, Policy and Language Planning

Policy scholars highlight the role of multi-level governance in shaping language education outcomes (Hornberger, 2006). Statutory frameworks and national strategies can scale immersion provision and ensure equity, while decentralised models may foster local innovation but risk fragmentation (May, 2012). Inspection regimes and statutory planning instruments (e.g. strategic plans, school categorisation) are central to accountability and coherence (Gorard & Taylor, 2002).

Evaluation and Professional Learning

Effective immersion requires aligned evaluation systems that measure both academic and language outcomes (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Lesson study and collaborative professional learning are widely documented as powerful mechanisms for pedagogical improvement in East Asian contexts (Lewis, 2002;

Takahashi & McDougal, 2016). Conversely, externally led inspection systems can drive system-wide standards and equity when combined with supportive professional development (Sahlberg, 2011).

Sociolinguistic Drivers and Community Integration

Language motivation, community use, and media ecology shape the sustainability of immersion outcomes (Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1982). The presence of situational, everyday language use (e.g. through family, community, and digital media) supports retention and transfer beyond school (Fishman, 1991). Studies of migrant learners emphasise identity negotiation and the need for programmes that address social belonging as well as linguistic competence (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Caselius & Suutari, 2025).

Governance and Policy Architecture in Tokyo

National Framework and Local Discretion

Japan's national education architecture is highly centralised. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) issues the Course of Study, sets teacher certification standards, and prescribes curriculum guidelines (MEXT, 2020). The Course of Study's 2020 revision emphasised communicative competence in English, introducing formal instruction in Grade 5 and earlier oral activities in Grade 3. However, classroom practice remains influenced by grammar-translation traditions and high-stakes assessment cultures (Dixon, 2025, fieldwork).

Crucially, Japan lacks a national immersion strategy. Immersion-style programmes, where subject content is delivered through a second language, are not mandated and typically arise from local initiative, demographic necessity, or institutional innovation (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2020).

Tokyo's Dual-Tiered Governance

Tokyo represents a metropolitan exception within Japan's centralised system. The Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education (TMBE) functions at a prefectural level, overseeing metropolitan high schools and strategic innovation, while ward-level Boards of Education manage elementary and junior high schools under the Local Education Administration Law (1956). This dual-tiered model enables metropolitan-level initiatives (e.g. Tokyo Global Gateway; CLIL pilots) alongside ward-level experimentation tailored to local demographics (Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education, 2025).

The TMBE's strategic functions include funding teacher development in immersion pedagogy, piloting CLIL in secondary settings, and coordinating cross-ward initiatives. Ward boards exercise autonomy over staffing, budgeting, and school-level innovation, enabling targeted responses for migrant integration and bilingual support (Minato Ward Education, 2025; Edogawa City Education, 2025).

Private and International School Sector

International and private schools operate outside MEXT's standard curriculum and are often classified as miscellaneous schools (kakushu gakkō), granting them curricular autonomy and the capacity to deliver immersion by default (Private Schools Act). These institutions frequently adopt IB or foreign curricula and assess language proficiency using CEFR-aligned rubrics and IB moderation. While they drive innovation and parental demand for bilingual pathways, their fee-based access contributes to stratification and limited public accountability (St. Mary's International School fieldwork, 2025).

Wales's Statutory Immersion System and Inspection Regime

Cymraeg 2050 and Strategic Planning

Wales positions immersion as a central instrument of language revitalisation. Cymraeg 2050 sets explicit targets for Welsh-medium provision and speaker numbers, framing education as the primary lever for change (Welsh Government, 2017). The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and subsequent Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) operationalise these aims at local authority level, requiring ten-year targets, annual monitoring, and alignment with national milestones (Welsh Government, 2019).

Local Authority Roles and Welsh Education Forums

Local authorities translate national strategy into local action through WESPs and Welsh Education Forums (WEFs), which convene LA officers, school leaders, early years providers, and community stakeholders to coordinate expansion, workforce development, and transition arrangements. Scrutiny mechanisms under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 ensure transparency and public accountability (Welsh Government, 2021).

School Categorisation and Curriculum for Wales

A revised school categorisation framework clarifies language status and transition pathways (e.g. C1–C3, T2–T3), supporting strategic planning and parental clarity. The Curriculum for Wales (mandatory from 2022) embeds Welsh language learning from age 3 and provides a single continuum for progression, reinforcing immersion pedagogy across the system (Welsh Government, 2022). Although this continuum has been criticised for its lack of clarity and CEFR has been written into to support measurement of Welsh language proficiency.

Estyn Inspection and Accountability

Estyn's revised inspection framework (2024) evaluates immersion arrangements through a learner-centred, context-sensitive approach. Inspections assess teaching and learning, wellbeing, and leadership, with teams including peer inspectors and LA nominees. Estyn's narrative reports and follow-up mechanisms provide external accountability and support continuous improvement in immersion settings (Estyn, 2024).

Comparative Evaluation and Pedagogical Implications

Evaluation Models: School-Led Cycles Versus External Inspection

Tokyo's evaluation relies heavily on school-led PDCA cycles, lesson study, and external advisory panels. These mechanisms foster iterative improvement and teacher collaboration but lack standardised national benchmarks for immersion outcomes. Wales combines school self-evaluation with external inspection by Estyn, producing system-level consistency and statutory accountability. Each model has strengths: Tokyo's approach supports local responsiveness and professional learning; Wales's model secures equity and alignment with national language goals.

Professional Learning and Lesson Study

Tokyo's lesson study tradition (jugyō kenkyū) offers a robust model for collaborative professional learning, enabling teachers to co-design, observe, and refine immersion lessons. Wales could benefit from integrating structured lesson study into its professional development repertoire to deepen pedagogical expertise in immersion contexts (Lewis, 2002).

Sociolinguistic Contexts and Motivation

Sociolinguistic drivers differ markedly. Wales's immersion is motivated by language revitalisation and intergenerational transmission; community use of Welsh remains uneven, requiring targeted community and digital interventions to normalise use outside school. Tokyo's immersion pilots respond to migrant integration and global competence, but non-native learners and transient families often perceive Japanese as low utility, undermining motivation (Matsumoto & Obana, 2024; Ichiyanagi, 2025, fieldwork). Both contexts highlight the importance of situational language opportunities and culturally resonant media to sustain motivation.

Equity and Access

Wales's statutory framework foregrounds equity through WESPs, funding for late immersion, and Estyn oversight. Tokyo's ward-level innovations provide targeted support for migrant learners but produce variability in access and quality. The private sector's prominence in Tokyo raises concerns about stratification; Wales's public entitlement model mitigates such risks but faces workforce constraints and regional disparities.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Situational Language Opportunities
   Invest in community-based micro-environments (e.g. pop-up Welsh-speaking hubs, youth clubs) and experiential centres modelled on Tokyo Global Gateway to extend language use beyond school and support retention in more Anglicised areas
   (Policy implication: cross-sector funding and local partnerships).

2. Expand Welsh-Language Digital Content
   Fund and promote age-appropriate Welsh-language digital creators across platforms to provide authentic situational listening and cultural resonance for young learners
   (Policy implication: cultural institutions and government support for content creators).

3. Integrate Lesson Study into Professional Development
   Adopt structured lesson study models within Welsh professional learning frameworks to deepen immersion pedagogy, while Tokyo systems should formalise lesson study outputs for cross-ward dissemination
   (Policy implication: allocate CPD time and resources for collaborative inquiry).

4. Standardise Proficiency Benchmarks and Bilingual Inspection Practices
   Wales should consider wider adoption of CEFR-aligned benchmarks; Wales could pilot cluster-based governance to improve strategic coherence across neighbouring schools.
   (Policy implication: intergovernmental dialogue and pilot funding).

5. Pilot Cluster-Based and Mixed-Medium Collaborations
   Explore cluster governance pilots and mixed-medium federations to enable resource sharing, joint staffing, and gradual infusion of immersion expertise into English-medium settings
   (Policy implication: guidance frameworks and evaluation of pilot outcomes).

6. Prioritise Equity in Access and Workforce Development

Both systems should invest in recruitment, retention, and targeted training for bilingual teachers, and ensure late immersion units and support services are equitably distributed (Policy implication: targeted funding and workforce pipelines).

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Tokyo and Wales reveals complementary strengths and distinct vulnerabilities. Wales demonstrates how statutory strategy, inspection, and local authority planning can scale immersion as a public entitlement and a vehicle for language revitalisation. Tokyo illustrates the potential of metropolitan flexibility, lesson study, and community integration to innovate within a centralised national system. Reciprocal learning integrating, Tokyo's collaborative professional learning with Wales's inspection accountability, offers a pathway to more resilient, equitable immersion systems. Realising this potential requires sustained investment in community language environments, digital cultural content, professional learning, and governance experiments that balance local responsiveness with system-wide coherence.

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