

Child language brokering



Macquarie University campus seemed to sleep in the summer sun once the semester ended last November, but there has been lots happening off campus! These “stoking coals” for the summer mind were generally linked by a focus on young people’s multilingual practices and in their community-centredness; many of the research activities I’ve encountered in recent months pool together the experience and energy of academics, teachers, community organisers and young people themselves. They ranged in form from school workshops, to inter-organisation research-sharing meetings and online community platforms. I’m going to share two ideas developed across these activities, first in relation to child language brokering, and second in relation to universities/academics doing outreach projects.

From a couple of the activities and discussions I had at them, I formed the distinct impression that Child Language Brokering (CLB) is poised to emerge ever more strongly this year as a research theme in sociolinguistics and education/educational linguistics. For those to whom the term “CLB” is unfamiliar, Ingrid wrote about [children as language brokers](#) here last year, and the recent UK [Child Language Brokering in School-Supporting Good Practice Guide](#) explains the terminology this way:

“We talk about children and adults being language brokers when they act as an agent for one party in a conversation. A professional interpreter is independent, impersonal and detached; a language broker is there to support someone”.

CLBs are part of the everyday operation of many multilingual and multicultural communities, but there’s relatively little empirical and/or ethnographic research into Who, What, When and Why, especially in Australia. Ingrid’s blog gave examples of CLB mediators in medical and legal communications, mainly from European and US experiences, which are likely similar to the Australian context. The Supporting Good Practice Guides’ authors, Cline, Crafter and Prokopiou, did the first UK study of CLB practices in the school context; I haven’t found a comparable Australian school study. They found that CLBs do a range of semi-prepared and impromptu translation and interpreting in the school space, mainly to facilitate communication between their teachers and their parents, and also between new pupils and the school community.

The first event in my summer of off-campus inspiration was a workshop devoted to multilingualism in Sydney's linguistic landscape at [North Sydney Girls High School](#), a leading, selective state school, which Ingrid and I both participated in. Language brokering stood out as language practice both personally and academically interesting to the group of bright high school researchers we met at the workshop.

The workshop was a culmination of a month-long group research project which the girls had worked on, guided by passionate teachers. 2015's group research theme was "Agents of Change – Hack Your City" and the students chose their research question from an array including sustainable architecture, local history and urban language.

The 'urban language' student researchers identified unmet needs amongst various types of multilinguals in northern Sydney: tourists, migrant families, and students who act as language and culture brokers for their parents, teachers and local communities. With regard to the latter, most of the girls themselves had experience as linguistic and cultural mediators, as over 90 percent of this school's students speak a language other than English at home.

It was with this experience in mind that I seized upon another community-based linguistics event in January, when I temporarily left the sunny Macquarie campus for a warm but wintery library in London's university district. I saw a notice for a meeting of the [NALDIC](#) South and Central London Research Interest Group, an assembly of proactive university linguistics and education researchers, English-as-an-Additional-Language school teachers, and community organisation staff. They had invited Dr Sarah Crafter, from the UCL Institute of Education, along to discuss her CLB research. Sarah is one of the authors of the Supporting Good Practice Guide I hyperlinked above. The NALDIC meeting proved to be a welcoming and stimulating discussion about young people's multilingualism in London, including language brokering, and also about publications, classroom practices and collective input to current education policy debates. I came away with many ideas about community-engaged and community-based linguistics to follow up and share. First, relating particularly to CLB, Sarah has built these two sites:

- <http://languagebrokering.org/> This is Sarah's newer site and is intended as platform to build up a research community around CLB themes. It has a growing directory of researchers around the world and blogs on CLB research.
- <http://child-language-brokering.weebly.com>. This site offers for download journal publications reporting on research into CLBs in UK schools, and the Supporting Good Practice Guide.

To round out this review of a summer (and winter) of fine examples of engaged, invigorating activities about children's language practices, I was especially inspired by the London-based linguistics-in-the-community activity, Translators in Schools (and the related [Big Translate](#) event). These workshops develop both monolingual and multilingual children's language skills and encourage literacy. And they look so much fun! This [terrific video](#) explains "Translators in Schools" well enough to warrant me not paraphrasing further. Please comment below and tell me if you wouldn't have benefited from such an activity yourself at primary school!