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Ten lessons from the Bridging Language Barriers Symposium

By Ingrid Piller

5-6 minutes



Presenters and members of the organizing team at the Bridging Language Barriers Symposium

Last week the Language-on-the-Move team at Macquarie University was fortunate to host a delegation of education researchers from Hamburg University. Our visitors included [Professor Ingrid Gogolin](#), [Professor Drorit Lengyel](#), [Dr Tobias Schroedler](#) and PhD candidate [Hanne Brandt](#). The aim of the visit was to engage Australian and German research perspectives on multilingual education and to work towards closer academic collaboration.

The highlight of the visit of the Hamburg team was the [Bridging](#)

[Language Barriers Symposium](#) on March 16, where the German research perspectives offered by our colleagues from Hamburg University were complemented with Australian perspectives offered by colleagues from the Australian Catholic University, Australian National University, Deakin University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Sydney University and the University of New South Wales. Over 70 attendees from various institutions in Sydney and as far afield as Brisbane and Melbourne joined us for an exciting day.

In the virtual world, we had a lively conversation going on Twitter under the [hashtag #LOTM2017](#), which reached 27,346 accounts and 93,066 impressions. If you missed the conversation, [Alexandra Grey](#) has selected the most informative tweets under the #LOTM2017 hashtag and [curated them on Storify](#).

There are many lessons from the Bridging Language Barriers Symposium that will help the Hamburg and Macquarie teams and all the researchers involved in the symposium to advance their research collaboration in multilingual education. These are the Top Ten:

10 lessons from the Bridging Language Barriers Symposium

1. A language barrier occurs where linguistic diversity results in unequal access to social goods, including education, employment, health, welfare, the law and political and community participation.
2. Language barriers are largely linked to migration. Waves of migration occur in peaks and troughs. Immigration-highs tend to trigger short-term activism which dies down as migrant numbers decline. The lack of a sustained policy response to migration – including related language barriers – means that the wheel keeps being reinvented to the detriment of equal opportunities in a

- diverse society.
3. Bridging language barriers in education is not so much about language learning but about the role of languages in learning.
 4. Janus-faced attitudes to linguistic diversity – celebration of linguistic diversity in the abstract and deficit views of actual multilingual speakers – continue to hamper effective approaches to bridging language barriers.
 5. Widespread confusion between ‘language’ and ‘ethnicity’ (or ‘migrant background’ or ‘native/non-native speaker’) has resulted in a relative lack of policy-relevant data about the language repertoires of children in schools; the same is true of institutions generally.
 6. To overcome language barriers to educational success all language resources and aspirations of children and their families need to be supported: home languages, the language of schooling, and foreign languages.
 7. Both in Australia and Germany, educational policy focuses almost exclusively on supporting the language of schooling (English in Australia, German in Germany) and home languages are largely ignored. In the worst case, they are actively suppressed; in the best case, they suffer from benign neglect. Consistent efforts to promote home languages continue to be the exception that proves the rule.
 8. There is currently a more concerted research and policy effort to support home languages in the education system in Germany, where – in contrast to Australia – foreign language learning is also a key plank of education.
 9. Both in Australia and Germany, teachers, particularly non-language teachers, are relatively poorly prepared to deal productively with linguistic diversity in the classroom. The

integration of modules on linguistic diversity in all teacher training program is essential.

10. New technologies hold considerable potential to create better resources for multilingual learners but their development is subject to economic and ideological constraints.

Related posts:

- [Program of Bridging Language Barriers Symposium](#)
- [Abstracts of Bridging Language Barriers Symposium](#)
- [Sketches of presenters at Bridging Language Barriers Symposium by illustrator Sadami Konchi](#) (external link)
- [Twitter feed of Bridging Language Barriers Symposium curated on Storify by Alexandra Grey](#) (external link)
- [How do language barriers come about?](#)
- [Building bridges through multilingual schooling: a mother-tongue pilot in East Timor is showing the way](#)
- [‘I’m not listening to you!’ Interacting in a linguistically diverse society](#)

More related content to come in the following weeks so watch this space and the [#LOTM2017 hashtag!](#)