

Going Local in Language Education: *Cities as Sites for Cross-Sectoral Connection*

See [here](#) for the full programme

The Coalition for Language Education held its second symposium on March 28th, bringing together practitioners, researchers, community members and policymakers to ask a pressing question: in what ways can cities serve as crucial sites for the regeneration of language education across sectors.

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The event, organised in collaboration with UCL's Platform for Linguistic and Epistemic Justice, took place against a challenging policy backdrop this year. The publication of the Government's final report on the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR), alongside tightened English language requirements for immigration, had sharpened both the stakes and the urgency to respond to the new measures. Rising xenophobia and hostility to difference, declining provision in modern languages, massive underfunding in ESOL, and the overwhelming neglect of EAL and heritage/community languages all formed part of the context. Where our first symposium focused primarily on responding to first versions of the CAR, this year the aim was to facilitate and strengthen cross-sectoral dialogue and build on already existing local practices and networks in order to continue to cultivate and capitalise on the UK's multilingual energy and linguistic expertise.

Case studies from across language education - schools, universities, adult education, community organisations - set the scene. Presenters included Steven Fawkes (Newcastle City of Languages) on grassroots festival initiatives in the North-East; Andy Green on Modern Cockney as a model for non-standard Englishes; Clare Allison (NCLE Language Networks) on cross-city network development; Yongcan Liu and Anke Friedrich (CRICLE and Cambridge Bilingual Groups) on integrated heritage language planning in Cambridge; Becky Winstanley (English for Action) on ESOL collaborations in Tower Hamlets; and Jelena Čalić, Eszter Tarsoly and Ramona Gönczöl (PLEJ/PROLang, UCL SSEES) on arts-based, community-centred work at the interface of modern and heritage/community languages. Breakout room discussions gave everyone a chance to think alongside people from different sectors and the dialogue, by many accounts, was a really productive part of the day. The [Together Alliance](#) march took place on the same day in opposition to the rise of the far right. Some participants left the event to join the march, carrying a banner representing the Coalition. The afternoon closed with a panel discussion bringing together Yaron Matras (Aston University; Manchester City of Languages), Liz Black (Association for Language Learning), Zaina Aljumma (Open University), Vicky Gough (London City of Languages; British Council), and Sophia Smith-Galer (London Language Map), who responded to questions and themes emerging from the breakout groups.

Takeaways & tensions

The symposium was successful in fostering cross-sector dialogue around emerging principles for locally driven, inclusive, and critically informed approaches to language education.

Participants explored how urban contexts can serve as sites for regenerating language education in ways that better respond to local communities and diverse and changing educational settings. The event also generated proposals for new publications and encouraged the development of innovative, multimodal forms of outreach, alongside the formation of new partnerships and collaborations.

Symposium participants used a live Padlet board to raise questions in real time. Discussions we had engaged critically with existing hierarchies and disciplinary divisions within language education. Participants observed that the ways in which sectors are labelled (ESOL, EAL, mainstream English education, MFL, HHCL etc.) can reinforce these hierarchies, obscure shared concerns, and create artificial boundaries that limit collaboration.

Questions about power relations and hierarchies ran through the discussions: when institutions invite "other languages" into the classroom, they speak from authority, not from pupils' perspective, for whom "other language" is part of their integrated linguistic repertoire. Participants also pressed for more clarity on what decentring English actually looks like in practice: are local dialects accepted and validated?; is translanguaging embraced in curricula?; are educators learning (about) community languages? Which structural changes need to accompany local initiatives: community language GCSEs, local authority coordination, sustained funding and municipal support? A recurring concern centered on how mainstream schools can build genuine, lasting relationships with complementary schools, and whether these partnerships can move beyond occasional gestures which celebrate local multilingualism.

What's next?

We are planning to organise an online focus group discussion exploring issues of sectors' labelling and classification, record a podcast based on these discussions, and publish a position paper addressing questions raised during the symposium. Join our mailing list to find out more about the future steps and to take part in the coming discussions and events.

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