

Language teacher associations: key themes and future directions

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This paper presents the themes that emerge from the Special Issue on Language Teacher Associations (LTAs). I discuss various conceptualisations of LTAs, as well as the different theoretical frameworks which the contributors to the Special Issue use in their analysis. I then focus on some of the ways in which LTAs achieve their mission of providing Continuing Professional Development to language teachers. I discuss the importance of conferences for LTA, as a crucial space for CPD, as an valuable membership benefit, and as a space for initiating change. Throughout, I point out the implications of the various papers for LTAs, for researchers and for members of LTAs.

Introduction: Why a Special Issue on Language Teacher Associations?

The ELT and Applied Linguistics community has been celebrating a number of anniversaries recently, noting the establishment of a number of professional associations and academic departments within the relatively short period between 1964 and 1967, making this an important period in the development of our profession and related academic disciplines. They include, for example, the 50th anniversary of the Applied Linguistics Department at Birkbeck College, University of London, and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of what was then the Linguistic Science Department at the University of Reading. The 50th anniversary of the British Association for Applied Linguistics will be taking place in 2017; internationally, *AILA*, the *Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée* was founded in Nancy (France) in 1965. And on both sides of the Atlantic we are celebrating five decades of Language Teacher Associations (LTAsⁱ): the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), based in the UK, is celebrating its 50th annual international conference, in the year leading up to the 50th anniversary of its foundation in 1967; and the TESOL International Association, based in the USA, celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2016.

In spite of the long history of LTAs, however, they have rarely been the subject of academic study or research (Aubrey and Coombe 2010, Lamb 2012). This special issue begins to remedy this, and broadens and deepens our understanding of LTAs in a number of ways. In this introductory paper, I discuss the ways in which the eight papers in the Special Issue contribute to this understanding, as well as the ways in which they contribute to a development of different conceptualisations of LTAs and different methodologies for researching them. I point out links between the papers, and suggest an agenda for future research which emerges from them. I also raise a number of uncomfortable issues, asking questions about the identity of language teacher associations, who they are for, whether they serve the constituencies that they claim to serve, and how they can best contribute to the CPD of their members – which, as we shall see, is ultimately the main goal of LTAs.

I write this paper as Guest Editor of this Special Issue, but also from the point of view of a member of IATEFL, a former Special Interest Group (SIG) Coordinator and a former Treasurer (and therefore member of the Board of Trustees) of the Association. Although I have been a member of TESOL International and am still a member of ETAI (English Teachers' Association of Israel), IATEFL is the association which I know best, both at a grassroots level and at Board level, and I therefore relate much of what this Special Issue tells us to this association. Readers may wish to reflect on the extent to which what I am saying relates to the specific LTA that they are members of.

LTA: Definitions and main activities

Defining and Conceptualising LTAs

Lamb (2012) is helpful in positioning LTAs in relationship to two other types of association - subject associations and professional associations. Subject associations (e.g. the Geographical Association or the Association for Citizenship Teaching in the UK) normally combine an element of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) with a strong external role 'as expert advocate of their subjects, influencing external audiences such as policy makers and the general public' (Lamb 2012:288). Professional associations (eg the Royal College of General Practitioners) often involve additional elements, notably setting standards for the profession and sometimes being involved in certification. Lamb then goes on to provide a useful definition of LTAs, based on a large scale international survey:

'networks of professionals, run by and for professionals, focused mainly on support for members, with knowledge exchange and development as well as representation of members' views as their defining functions' (2012).

This definition highlights the fact that most LTAs in Lamb's survey see their role as providing CPD for members in some shape or form. It is interesting to note that in Lamb's definition, the external advocacy element which is so important for subject associations as well as professional associations is positioned as the last element for LTAs, as an addition their to core activities.

Most papers in this issue fit in well with this definition of LTAs, though some papers present teacher associations through the lenses of slightly different conceptualisations: as membership associations (Motteram); charities (Motteram; Padwad); movements (Kamhi-Stein); and Communities of Practice (Herrero). Indeed, a number of these papers point out that a UK-based or a US-based conceptualisation of a teachers' association will not automatically encapsulate practices and conceptualisations elsewhere: Miyahara and Stewart discuss the way in which the concept of *gakkai* in Japan does not easily map onto the western concept of an LTA; Padwad discusses the different view of charity that is prevalent in India. Thus although we may talk about an LTA, and although LTAs obviously have a great deal in common - the focus on teacher development, organising conferences, publications - there may be differences in the way such organisations function.

LTAs and conferences

One aspect of LTA activity that emerges very clearly from all the papers in this issue is conferences, and their centrality in the life of LTAs and their members (see also Aubrey and Coombe 2010; Borg 2015). Indeed, Padwad singles the ELTAI conference as the most important achievement of ELTAI. The centrality of conferences emerges both from the views of LTA officers and position-holders (see, for example, Miyahara and Stewart) and from points made by members (Motteram). Conferences are an important member benefit (if we take a membership organisation view of LTAs) and an important CPD opportunity – many LTA members attend conferences specifically to refresh their enthusiasm, find out about new trends and resources in the field, and to engage in professional debate. The centrality of conferences to LTA activity is also evident in the fact that most LTAs provide reports on their conferences to members who are unable to attend, either in a newsletter, or in a refereed publication such as *IATEFL Selections* (see also Rixon and Smith 2016 for an account of how this played out in the early years of IATEFL). A conference is often a central – if not *the* central - event in the LTA calendar. Indeed, some LTAs, especially at their beginning stages, do not have activities other than their annual conference.

Conferences can also become spaces for initiating change within the association and even within the profession, as illustrated in this issue by Kamhi-Stein and by Smith and Kucha. Kamhi-Stein traces the beginning of the non-native English speaker teacher (NNEST) caucus in the TESOL International Association to a conference presentation in 1996, thus illustrating the way new groups in LTAs can form at conference, and key issues can be identified and acted upon. This is not an isolated case: the impetus for establishing the LGBT and Friends caucus in the TESOL International Association also emerged from a conference presentation (Carscadden, Nelson and Ward, 1992). Similarly, in this issue Smith and Kuchah document the way in which the dynamics of a conference in Cameroon provided the impetus for initiating a change in the role of the association and to the concept of a ‘researching TA’.

Smith and Kuchah also point out the knowledge-transmission nature of the conference plenary (though one could argue that other types of presentation may also exhibit similar one-way transmission). In their paper, Smith and Kuchah show how TAs and conferences can become better conduits for a two-way dialogue between teachers and researchers (though of course not all plenaries are by researchers). Part of the dialogue that was established was reporting the findings from an initiative launched in a plenary one year in a plenary at the following conference. This was thus an attempt to bridge between the conferences and counteract the ‘one-off’ aspect of conferences. This reporting was also part of creating bridges between researchers and teachers, and indeed Smith and Kuchah deliberately set out to blur the binary distinction that is often posited between the two groups.

In spite of their centrality, however, conferences – and more importantly, the learning and professional development that happens in conferences – are an under-researched phenomenon. Most such research is in the form of evaluations conducted by the organising LTA itself, and is normally constrained by the practical type of feedback that an LTA wants and needs – normally with the purpose of implementing improvements for the next conference. Such research does not often provide us with rich understandings of learning. Borg's (2015) study provides important information about what teachers believe they learnt from a conference, but he surveyed only teaching professionals who had been supported to attend a conference, thus probably focusing on a non-representative elite. Interestingly, Aubrey and Coombe (2010), in their study of the TESOL Arabia conference, drew a sample from among teachers in specific institutions, which included both conference participants and non-participants, thus succeeding in getting information from non-conference goers.

Fisher, Moore and Baber's study in this volume is important in its attempt to understand conferences and, in particular, participant interaction in a virtual conference. One challenge for future research is to delve even deeper into how conferences contribute to teacher development, and what actually changes in teachers' practice as a result. Another challenge is to combine the interests of teacher educators and researchers interested in CPD (questions of how learning happens at conferences, how learning happens through membership in an association) and the interests of the LTAs (an understanding of what services members want and need), all the while taking advantage of the practical ability of LTAs to reach their members.

LTAs, knowledge production and knowledge dissemination

In addition to conferences, the other major locus of knowledge dissemination for LTAs is publication, and many associations produce a variety of publications, well beyond the conference report or refereed proceedings mentioned above. TESOL International, for example, has a strong publications record, both in terms of its journals, the *TESOL Quarterly* and the *TESOL Journal*, and in terms of books. In IATEFL, the bi-monthly *Voices* and the refereed annual *Conference Selections* are part of the membership benefits. Meanwhile, Miyahara and Stewart (this issue) report that JALT SIGs are obliged to produce three publications a year. An interesting avenue for future exploration would be to understand the types of publications that LTAs produce – academic journals, teachers' journals, books, conference proceedings, SIG publications – and, for example, explore whether there are any differences between the type of publishing that LTAs engage in and the professional and academic publications produced by commercial publishers. Another possible area of enquiry is the reception of LTA publications. Do members read them? What effect do these publications have on the members' professional development? If an LTA or an LTA SIG does not fulfil its publications remit, do members complain or notice? (In my experience as an IATEFL SIG coordinator, they often do not). An understanding of these issues could be a valuable addition to our understanding not only of LTAs, but of CPD in general – how important are ELT publications to practitioners, how do they engage with published content, and to what extent does this affect what goes on in the classroom?

These issues lead us to the wider question of the LTA as ‘knowledge producer’ or ‘knowledge disseminator’. This is the main focus of the paper by Miyahara and Stewart. Indeed, they suggest that *who* creates knowledge and *how* it is disseminated is essential to our understanding of LTAs and their relationship to the wider profession. Miyahara and Stewart show that knowledge creation was conceptualised differently – as research or as publication – by the different LTAs that they examined. We might extend the question and ask who is the intended audience of different types of LTA publication – are they aimed at researchers? Are they aimed at teachers? Other examples of the LTA as a knowledge producer and disseminator is Smith and Kuchah’s discussion of the researching TA. Fisher, Moore and Baber’s (this volume) analysis of participation in an online conference can be also be taken as an exploration of creating and disseminating knowledge in the virtual conference room. Indeed, a consideration of these papers together suggests that there are three ways of conceptualising knowledge in an LTA: transmission; creation; and collaborative creation/sharing.

Theoretical frameworks

One notable phenomenon in this special issue is the wide variety of approaches and theoretical frameworks that inform the work of the contributors. Though some contributors take a straightforward thematic analysis approach to their data, others embed this in wider contexts of research and theory. These include the discourse analytic approach taken by Fisher, Moore and Baber to analyse actual interactions in virtual conferences; the cultural perspective taken by Padwad; the Foucauldian lens which Miyahara and Stewart adopt in their discussion of power; a sociological perspective taken by Kamhi-Stein to analyse ‘movements’ within TESOL; and a Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) approach taken by Motteram as well as by Herrero, who provides a detailed discussion what a Community of Practice actually means and an example of setting out to construct an LTA as a Community of Practice.

Apart from the obvious point that these theoretical frameworks can be taken and possibly applied to other aspects of the profession, readers might ask themselves in what ways theoretical approaches can be transferred from one paper to another. For example, would an analysis of power relationships help us understand the issues that underlie the native-speakerism phenomena that Kamhi-Stein talk about? What elements of the analysis of virtual conferences can be taken into an analysis of a face-to-face conference? What is the difference between the CoP view adopted by Herrero and that adopted by Motteram? What is the difference between an approach that informed the design of an association and approaches which an LTA grew into? What does Padwad’s description of charity and charitable giving in India tell us about our assumptions regarding charity in other contexts? Indeed, Padwad’s paper, when read carefully, should make us understand the way in which our own cultural assumptions permeate everything we do in the LTA we are involved in.

Structures and organisation of LTAs

Most papers in the Special Issue discuss the existence of Special Interest Groups (SIGs), chapters, branches, and caucuses, as well as affiliates and associates, thus implicitly demonstrating the variety of structures existent. These structures emerge in response to different contextual factors. One important factor is geography: many associations described in this volume have chapters or branches that are local in character. Another factor is professional interest, as in the case of SIGs and Interest Sections. Other issues also influence the creation of different structures: As Kamhi-Stein (this volume) explains, up to 2008 TESOL International also had caucuses, distinguished by their focus not on professional issues, but on other issues that are central to the identity of many teachers, often to do with discrimination or marginalisation (eg on the basis of sexuality, native-speaker status, or race.)

LTAs also exhibit a large variation in size: even within Japan, Miyahara and Stewart report that there are more than 50 English LTAs, with membership ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands. Interestingly, some of these LTAs began as sections within older teachers' associations, and Miyahara and Stewart discuss the way some of these associations changed focus during their history.

LTA's operate at different levels of local and global organisation. There are two large international associations in ELT– IATEFL and TESOL International. Importantly, their international remit does not mean that they necessarily have more members than other LTAs. The next level is the national level, which is the reach of most of the TAs discussed in this Special Issue. Many TAs, however, are more local than that. In Spain, for example, there is a national TA (TESOL Spain), but there are also local TAs in the different regions of the country (e.g. APAC in Catalunya, APIGA in Galicia). Likewise, in Germany most TAs are local – MELTA in Munich, ELTAB in Berlin, and so on. Many national TAs have 'chapters' (see below) but in some countries this relationship is reversed – the national association is a federation of local associations (eg FAAPI in Argentina). In addition, there are a number of regional clusters of organisations, such as for example SEETA (South Eastern Europe Teachers Associations), or regional associations such as Asia TEFL. Relationships between teacher associations can create tensions, too: some smaller LTAs might resist links with larger ones out of the fear of losing members or of being absorbed. In this regard, nomenclature – the difference in relationships implied by the words branches, chapter, affiliates or associates – can assume great importance. As Kamhi-Stein explains, when the TESOL NNEST Caucus (see below) became an Interest Section this was seen as an important point in the development of the NNEST movement.

Some associations have a small number of SIGs (see Padwad), but for others the level of activity of SIGs, taken together, can often become quite substantial. This is seen in the publication requirements for the JALT SIGs, for example (see Miyahara and Stewart). The same can be true of events. In 2015, for example, while the main IATEFL conference had 2550 attendees, the IATEFL SIGs also had 9 conferences or events of their own, attracting a total of 921 participants. There were also 10 IATEFL webinars, attracting 914 participants and 43 IATEFL SIG webinars, attracting 1245 participants. In such cases where LTAs have a large number of SIGs responsible for a large proportion of the professional activities (and indeed the finances) of the association, tensions can arise between the parent organisation and smaller units, over such questions as who has control of the finance and who determines the types of activity. In terms of organisation, this suggests that often LTAs operate a model of distributed leadership, and that power may often reside in the smaller organisational units of the association. But this also leads us to the question of what membership of an LTA means, which is the point to which I now turn.

How representative are LTAs? The issue of membership

One issue which is central to the conception and operation of LTAs is who 'constitutes' any specific LTA, who the members are, and what membership means to them. Most associations have different types of membership, sometimes differentiated by financial considerations (eg reduced memberships for students, retirees, or members from low Human Development Index countries), but often also differentiated by type of benefit. Gnawali (this volume) describes the Life Membership in NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers Association) and what it entails. As some of the papers here show, membership often results in a feeling of belonging and community; these are particularly highlighted by Motteram but are present elsewhere, such as the accounts from members' comments by Gnawali and by Smith and Kuchah.

However, just as with conferences, the issue of non-participation and non-representation is important here too. Kirkham (2015), in a survey of 40 LTAs suggests that TAs often do not represent the larger mass of teachers in a country. This is an important issue, though it is not easy to understand or research. Some TAs cater mainly for the public sector, others cater mainly for the private sector (Kirkham 2015). Others may represent only the teachers in a capital city. Such divisions often have geographical or historical roots, but future research could look at the reasons for such divisions and see whether this reflects a lack of recognition of the benefits of LTA membership or whether there is a mismatch between the membership benefits on offer and teachers' perceived needs.

A number of papers in this volume are expressly concerned with addressing issues of inclusivity, non-representation and voice within LTA contexts. Motteram discusses the way in which IATEFL supports projects and memberships in low Human Development Index countries (though noting that these efforts are not always successful); Fisher, Moore and Baber describe in detail one of those initiatives, a virtual conference. In a similar vein, Kamhi-Stein describes the way in which a group of people, non-native speaker teachers of English, who had felt marginalised and invisible, found ways to organise and find their voice in the profession. Importantly, she notes the disruptive element this entails (a point to consider when reading other accounts of change in LTAs). Smith and Kuchah describe the process by which conference participants (and by extension, LTA members) were given a voice in the direction their LTA would take. Their description of the way conference goers were informed about developments that had been initiated in the previous conference are an example of a participatory approach that also reminds us of the reciprocal relationship which Gnawali describes in the case of NELTA. Inclusivity matters, of course, because if a LTA's reach is restricted, if it is not inclusive and if members do not have a voice, this impacts both on the individual members (who may leave the association); on non-members (whose needs are then not met); and on the development of the profession as a whole.

Furthermore, in terms of research, there is the issue of who is empowered to speak on behalf of the LTA, and who is empowered to speak within it. Many studies present the point of view of the leaders and officers of LTAs; Lamb (2012) focused on the views of LTA representatives; most of the papers in this Special Issue were either written by present or former board members of the LTAs or focus on the views of LTA officials. Future studies would carry on the work described in this Special Issue and extend it to understanding the voices of all LTA members.

Tensions and dichotomies

Finally, I would like to highlight a number of tensions which can arise in the work of LTAs. One important external facing tension is the complex relationship between LTAs, public bodies such as ministries, academic bodies, and publishers and other commercial sponsors (see Miyahara and Stewart, this volume). Kirkham (2015) reports that of his 40 respondents, two LTAs survive on sponsorship alone, and five receive government grants. He points out the financial support that some sponsors (private, public, or governmental) provide for TAs may mean that some of the control over the activity of the TA is in the hands of these sponsors.

This is implicit in the relationship between LTAs and government agencies, but also internally in the relationship between the central association and its sub-units, the centralising force of a Head Office and the activities of the smaller groups. That organisational issues matter is highlighted by Kamhi-Stein in her description of the formation of the NNEST caucus, and her suggestion that in other affiliates members might lack the organizational structures to bring such issues to the fore.

The grass roots, bottom-up force in LTAs is of great importance. A good example of this comes through in Herrero's account of the establishment of FILTA and its open structure. Yet another example is Smith and Kucha's account of the way in which the topic of a plenary at a conference was changed in response to the way that conference unfolded.

Another tension that most LTAs experience is that between closed activities – activities for members only, either members of the TA, or members of the SIG, and activities that are open to the wider public of EFL teachers. IATEFL's Facebook page has 12,800 members – many more than it has members. Often each part of the association finds its own solution to these dilemmas and reaches a different compromise: for example, IATEFL Webinars are open to all, but after the event access is restricted to members only.

Finally, a recurring tension that arises is that between wider and narrower definitions of professional concerns and the relationship of these professional concerns with socio-political issues that arise. Many associations have a Global Issues SIG. What then do we mean by 'Global Issues'? How do international associations deal with the political tensions between countries that do not recognise each other, for example? What meaning does 'Global Issues' take on when wars break out? This is a good example of the way in which the internally facing concerns and the externally facing concerns of LTAs collide and create a tension which many LTAs have yet to resolve.

Language teacher associations: looking to the Future

This Special Issue provides an opportunity for an examination of the work of LTAs, both nationally and internationally. Papers here examine important issues such as membership, participation, conferences, social issues, publications, and conceptions of LTAs, doing so through a variety of theoretical lenses. Through presenting us with a body of knowledge and research into LTAs, they also set out areas for future investigation. Thus, throughout this paper I have suggested areas where additional research would contribute to an even better understanding of the issues involved in creating and maintaining an LTA, and understanding how teachers and other ELT professionals might develop through LTA membership as well as what they might contribute. In some sense one could ask whether such research, either reported in this special issue or projected for the future, is important, and for whom. I believe that it is indeed vitally important, not only for LTAs and their officials, but for LTA members and teachers more generally. Understanding the challenges facing different TAs and different membership associations in the 21st century through researching them and researching their members must be part of the continuous professional development of LTAs themselves.

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ⁱ Different contributors to this volume have chosen to refer to Teacher Associations (TAs) or to Language Teacher Associations (LTAs). Strictly speaking, we should be referring to English Language Teacher Associations (ELTAs), as there are quite striking differences between ELTAs and other LTAs – not least in the fact that membership of LTAs in other languages is shrinking rapidly as English takes over the space still occupied in some countries by other languages. However, I have decided to refer to LTAs rather than ELTAs in this paper as being less cumbersome, and the more usual abbreviation.