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EDITORIAL



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Introduction

For over 140 years, language teacher associations (LTAs) have been instrumental in overseeing the progression and pedagogy of diverse languages and have been pivotal in fostering educators' professional growth (Wheeler 2018). While the core mission of these associations – to organize and facilitate professional learning for the enhancement of language education – has been consistent (Uludag 2018), the mechanisms and strategies they employ have undergone significant transformations. LTAs are no longer static; they are dynamic and evolving entities, often at the forefront of innovative change within the field (Pentón Herrera 2022). This evolution is underscored in scholarship identifying LTAs as critical nodes in expansive professional networks, driving radical shifts in language education and teacher empowerment (Lamb 2012). Despite their recognized leadership, however, the existing scholarly narrative on LTAs is surprisingly scant and underwhelming. This lack of scholarly attention on LTAs' evolving roles and expectations (Elsheikh, Coombe, and Effiong 2018), and innovative methods to empower language educators (Banegas et al. 2022) was the impetus for this Special Issue.

Most of the available publications on LTAs have primarily focused on English language teacher associations (ELTAs), with fewer publications devoted to and authored by LTAs of other languages. Additionally, the available publications that would generally fall under the umbrella of LTA scholarship use different terminologies – sometimes interchangeably – such as teacher associations, LTAs, ELTAs, communities of practice (CoPs), foreign language teacher associations (FLTAs), and professional organizations for teachers of world languages, which dilutes and separates the scholarship into isolated islands. To date, the paucity of research available and the lack of conversations about the operationalization of a central umbrella term to build foundational knowledge for the field remain two important challenges for LTAs that necessitate immediate attention. Further, this inattention highlights the need for the field to more actively engage in scholarship that fills the notable gaps and sheds light on the potential of local, national, and international LTAs as incubators for innovation in educator professional development and learning opportunities.

For clarity, in this Special Issue, we understand LTAs as professional organizations, institutions, groups, or initiatives that support language teachers, learners, and communities at any level. Although the term 'association' is often used to describe formal membership-based, teacher-led entities with clearly defined internal and external roles, contemporary LTAs operate in increasingly diverse ways. Many now take the form of hybrid or context-specific structures that facilitate professional development and learning without the conventional features of an association. What unites the contributors represented in this collection is the function they perform rather than the form they take. Each LTA, understood in this broader way, provides a space where educators come together to organize, facilitate, and transform professional development and learning. Further, this broader conceptualization enables us to include innovative contributions which differ structurally from traditional LTAs but still

fulfill essential LTA functions by shaping educator preparation, community engagement, and success for language teachers and learners. By stating these criteria explicitly, we aim to clarify the rationale guiding the selection of contributions and to highlight the shared purpose that connects all of them: the cultivation of collaborative and context-responsive language educator professional development and learning.

To that end, this Special Issue was conceived with the purpose of examining the ways in which LTAs, including LTAs of languages other than English, empower educators, especially language teachers, through diverse, inclusive, and innovative professional development and learning opportunities in local, national, and international spaces. It was born out of the collaborative work of the three editors of the Special Issue, who are also past presidents of the Maryland Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (MDTESOL) Association and co-authors of the *Maryland TESOL Handbook for Educators of English Learners* (Pentón Herrera, Fagan, and Lyons 2021), a first-of-its-kind professional resource and tool created by and for the MDTESOL for everything related to English learner education, including teacher preparation and statewide advocacy (Fagan, Lyons, and Pentón Herrera 2026).

The imperative for innovation within language education has never been more pronounced, as contemporary pedagogical landscapes are rapidly evolving due to technological advancements and shifts in global communication (Grassini 2023). LTAs, standing at the nexus of research, practice, and professional growth, are poised to be powerful conduits for pioneering educator development paradigms. Highlighting this potential for innovation by showcasing empirical studies that unravel the transformative roles of LTAs is at the heart of this Special Issue and affords the opportunity for articulating and providing a blueprint for LTAs' innovative practices in educator professional development and learning. In the only study of its kind (prior to this Special Issue), to our knowledge, Lamb (2012) suggests that LTAs can serve as platforms for disseminating 'flexible, innovative, interactive, easily accessible and time-efficient' (302) opportunities in educator professional development and learning. Furthermore, as we have stated elsewhere, the flexibility of LTAs often stems from their exemption from governmental administrative regulations related to degree-granting teacher certification (Fagan, Lyons, and Pentón Herrera 2025).

Given LTAs' unique placement in the language education ecosystem, examining the efficacy of professional development and learning opportunities through these associations is particularly pertinent in the present times. Technological advancements, especially in artificial intelligence (AI), are accelerating rapidly; simultaneously, global societal norms and political dynamics surrounding the value and necessity of language education are shifting. Educational improvements and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic are also shaping current pedagogical approaches. It is also clear that all educators, not just those with the designated label 'language teacher,' influence language learning opportunities both within and outside of classroom settings. Adding a fresh dimension to this discourse, our Special Issue delves into how LTAs engineer the evolution of educator professional development and learning by embedding emerging technologies, contextual knowledge and demands, and creative, interdisciplinary approaches into their practice. The collection of articles demonstrates how LTAs can transcend traditional professional education by operationalizing the concept of innovation through proactive strategies that respond to the pressing need for evolving educator professional development and learning.

Contributions to the special issue

In the first contribution, Terry Lamb and Sylvia Velikova (2025) revisit the evolving landscape of LTAs through a global study encompassing forty associations worldwide. Building on Lamb's

seminal 2012 research, the authors explore how LTAs have navigated profound sociopolitical and technological shifts since the late 2000s. The authors identify five interrelated dimensions – (1) spaces for manoeuvre, (2) LTAs as knowledge producers, (3) technological developments, (4) interlingual shared spaces, and (5) advocacy and critical collective autonomy – that collectively position LTAs as dynamic, multidimensional agents of professional innovation. By illuminating how LTAs balance local action with global collaboration and respond to emergent challenges such as artificial intelligence, deprofessionalization, and linguistic hegemony, Lamb and Velikova's contribution affirms the continuing vitality of LTAs as autonomous, value-driven spaces. Their study offers a timely, global perspective on the resilience, adaptability, and critical advocacy of LTAs amid accelerating educational and technological change.

In the second contribution, Beatrix Price (2025) explores the transformative potential of ELTAs in relation to how they can support professional development and learning by promoting collaboration. This exploratory study, conducted on a global scale with 27 leaders representing 25 ELTAs across five continents, employed a qualitative research design, incorporating four focus group interviews and 16 in-depth interviews with leaders and volunteers affiliated with a range of ELTAs. By investigating local and cross-border cooperation, Price demonstrates how ELTAs serve as dynamic platforms for knowledge exchange, mentoring, and leadership learning. The results reveal that ELTAs serve as essential platforms for both formal and informal collaboration, facilitating individual and organizational professional growth through local and international projects. Ultimately, this contribution conceptualizes collaboration as a driving force for the survival of ELTAs, underscoring the importance of grassroots initiatives, transparency, strong leadership, and shared vision, responding to the evolving challenges of twenty-first-century language education.

In the third contribution, Mercedes Perez Berbain and Vanesa Polastri (2025) examine the effectiveness of collaborative, bottom-up professional development within a community of practice (CoP) supported by an ELTA in Argentina. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with both CoP members and ELTA executive committee participants, the authors illustrate how this initiative fostered a culture of professional agency, contextualised learning, and inclusive growth. By examining the structures and relationships that enabled the CoP to flourish, the article highlights how ELTAs can serve as catalysts for knowledge creation and practitioner-led innovation. The findings reveal a wide range of personal and professional benefits among participants, including enhanced critical thinking and confidence, as well as enriched perspectives informed by diverse teaching contexts. This study not only fills a gap in the literature regarding the concrete effects of ELTA-supported CoPs, especially in the context of Argentina, but also points to a promising model of flexible, educator-driven professional development and learning grounded in local realities and sustained by shared commitment.

In the fourth contribution, Michel Riquelme-Sanderson and colleagues (2025) explore the innovative use of podcasts as a professional development and learning tool for English language teachers and researchers in Chile. Focusing on a podcast-based project created by the Red de Investigación Chilena en ELT [English language teaching] (RICELT), a Chilean language teacher association, this qualitative, holistic, and descriptive case study draws on interviews with podcast creators to examine how this medium supports their own professional development and community building. The findings reveal that the podcast fosters collaboration, expands access to localized and global perspectives on ELT, and empowers educators by amplifying diverse voices toward social justice. The authors also reflect on its potential as a low-cost, scalable model of teacher-led professional development. This contribution highlights how grassroots digital initiatives, especially those led by language teacher associations, can

challenge traditional hierarchies in knowledge production and create dynamic, multilingual spaces for continuous learning.

In the fifth contribution, *A collaborative autoethnography on Vietnamese English language educators' professional development and learning in language teacher associations*, Giang Nguyen Hoang Le, Thinh Thi Nguyen, and Tan Xuan Pham (2025) offer a compelling examination of how ELTAs in Vietnam engage with and support educator autonomy. Using collaborative autoethnography as both method and praxis, the authors reflect on their own professional experiences across national, institutional, and community-based ELTAs. Their selected narratives reveal how structural hierarchies, publishing pressures, and uneven mentoring practices shape – and often limit – autonomous professional development and learning. The study highlights the complex interplay between educators' intrinsic motivations and the socio-political constraints of Vietnam's ELTA landscape. By foregrounding voice, inclusion, and critical reflection, Le, Nguyen, and Pham call for a more participatory and autonomy-supportive model of professional development. Their contribution offers valuable insights into teacher agency and association dynamics, particularly within the context of Vietnam.

In the sixth contribution of this special issue, Drew S. Fagan, Sherry Lyons, and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera (2025) present a qualitative case study examining how the *Maryland TESOL Handbook for Educators of English Learners* supports professional development and learning for teachers of English as an additional language (EAL). Through interviews with four educators across P-12, higher education, and adult learning contexts, the study highlights the Handbook's strengths as an accessible, context-specific, and advocacy-oriented resource. Developed by a local LTA, the Handbook exemplifies how LTAs can address regionally relevant educational challenges with tailored tools. Participants valued its open-access format, practical guidance, and localized content, which help bridge gaps in traditional professional development and learning offerings. The study also identifies opportunities for broader dissemination and increased inclusivity in pedagogical models. This article contributes to the growing recognition of LTAs as key agents in advancing language educator professional development and learning and institutional change through innovative, grassroots initiatives.

In the seventh contribution, *Mentoring presidents within English language teacher associations*, Daniel Xerri (2025) offers a timely and nuanced examination of leadership development in volunteer-led educational organisations. Drawing on interviews with seven ELTA presidents across diverse global contexts, the study explores how mentoring supports leaders in their preparation, transition, and professional growth. Participants described mentoring as a relational and context-responsive practice that intersected with other developmental processes such as volunteering, shadowing, and informal learning. The study highlights mentoring's pivotal role in addressing early leadership challenges, fostering leadership identity, and ensuring smoother succession processes. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of trust, mutual engagement, and experiential learning within mentoring relationships. While most participants did not experience formal mentoring, many benefited from informal support that was instrumental to their leadership trajectory. By framing mentoring as co-constructed and embedded in community practices, Xerri foregrounds its significance in cultivating sustainable leadership within ELTAs (Xerri 2025).

In the eighth and final contribution, Gartziaarena, Gaspar, and Olmedillo-Berasategi (2025) spotlight a unique form of LTA: the Teacher Training Faculties in the Basque Autonomous Community. Positioned within a richly multilingual and sociopolitically complex context, these Faculties operate as de facto LTAs that advocate for and sustain Basque-centered multilingualism. Through a mixed-methods design involving 331 pre-service teachers and focus group discussions, the study reveals how institutional spaces rooted in higher education function as hubs for professional development and language ideology formation. Findings

underscore the Faculties' pivotal role in shaping multilingual mindsets, reinforcing positive attitudes toward Basque, Spanish, and English, while also identifying the challenges surrounding language proficiency, perceived utility, and identity alignment. By focusing on pre-service teachers' evolving beliefs and identities, the study affirms the influence of localized LTAs in promoting minority language vitality and linguistic equity through education. This work contributes a critical perspective on LTAs beyond English, emphasizing their sociolinguistic responsibilities in multilingual education advocacy.

Final thoughts

LTAs, including ELTAs, continue to serve as essential drivers of innovation in professional development and learning across local, national, and global contexts. Their unique positioning outside formal certification systems allows them to respond nimbly to evolving educational demands, sociopolitical pressures, and technological advances that shape twenty-first-century language education. The contributions in this Special Issue illuminate the remarkable breadth of work undertaken by LTAs in supporting educators, whether by fostering leadership development, creating communities of practice, advocating for multilingual and minority-language rights, or developing context-responsive professional learning resources that address local and global priorities. Collectively, these studies illustrate how LTAs operate as dynamic, practitioner-led spaces where educators can exercise autonomy, generate knowledge, and collaboratively address emerging challenges in the field. They also reveal how LTAs' flexible structures allow them to innovate quickly, adapt to teacher-identified needs, and cultivate environments that value diverse linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical perspectives. Taken together, these insights reinforce the vital role LTAs play in sustaining professional growth and strengthening the broader landscape of language education.

Equally important, the articles demonstrate the profound impact of LTAs across the full arc of educators' professional lives. From pre-service preparation to expert leadership, LTAs support members' pedagogical growth, identity development, and well-being through grassroots initiatives that foreground collaboration, mentorship, and shared purpose. As educational landscapes continue to shift, driven by digital transformation, global mobility, increasing linguistic diversity, and renewed attention to equity and inclusion, LTAs stand poised to deepen their role as catalysts for innovative, inclusive, and contextually grounded professional development and learning. We hope that this Special Issue will serve as a catalyst for continued inquiry and dialogue, inviting scholars, practitioners, and association leaders to recognize, examine, and amplify the essential work of LTAs worldwide. Moving forward, more robust empirical scholarship is needed to document LTAs' diverse models of professional development and learning, illuminate their evolving functions, and explore their potential as transformative spaces that can shape the future of language education for generations to come.


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