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Language teacher associations as innovative and collectively autonomous spaces in changing times: a global study

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ABSTRACT

The first systematic survey of language teacher associations (LTAs) was conducted in 2008 and resulted in a practical handbook and an academic publication (Lamb, T., T. Atanasoska, M. Hepp, S. Jónsdóttir, and J. Zielinsky. 2012. *Learning from Each Other: A Handbook for Language Teacher Associations*. Graz: European Centre for Modern Languages; Lamb, T. 2012. "Language Associations and Collaborative Support: Language Teacher Associations as Empowering Spaces for Professional Networks." *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 6 (3): 287–308). This article discusses new research conducted in 2024–2025 that revisits key aspects of the original survey and explores changes in LTA activity since the first study, as well as new developments and challenges for language educators and LTAs themselves since 2008. Data were collected primarily through a global survey of 40 LTAs, representing national and international, unilingual and multilingual associations across the globe. The thematic analysis of the survey responses was integrated with insights from two in-depth group discussions with 13 LTA leaders from FIPLV member associations. Five thematic dimensions emerging from the data analysis are discussed: spaces for manoeuvre; LTAs as knowledge producers; technological developments: opportunities and challenges; interlingual shared spaces; and advocacy and critical collective autonomy. The findings demonstrate an enduring pattern of the professional identity of LTAs as dynamic, multidimensional, interlingual spaces for their members' collaborative learning, fostering critical collective autonomy and innovation with the strong potential to find the spaces for manoeuvre to develop value-based practices locally and globally. These dimensions also imply that, whatever their internal and external challenges, LTAs will continue to play a central role in advocating for languages and sustaining language teacher agency amidst wider global changes.

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1. Introduction

In 2008, a global survey was launched among language teacher associations (LTAs), membership organisations supporting educators of a wide range of languages. The aim was to collect and share information in order to facilitate collaboration and stimulate innovation. This survey, combined with data from networking meetings attended by LTA representatives across Europe, led to the publication in three languages of a practical online handbook for LTAs (Lamb et al. 2012) and a much-cited academic article (Lamb 2012). This current article will explore new research conducted in 2024–2025, aimed at revisiting key aspects of the original research, partly to explore how LTA activity might have changed, but also to identify new contextual developments and challenges impacting on the lives of language educators as well as on LTAs themselves since 2008. Given significant global changes, such as a technological revolution in relation to communications, social media and artificial intelligence (AI), a world economic crisis, a pandemic and, in some regions, increased migration and a resurgence of populist politics, the research is timely (e.g. Hatoss, Nordstrom, and Lamb 2024).

Following a review of research on LTAs since 2008 and a description of the research methodology, this article will discuss the shifts experienced by LTAs. These will be illustrated by the data and draw on a number of conceptual spatial lenses, including critical collective autonomy (Lamb and Vodicka 2018) and multidimensional collaborative spaces, in which professional identity and innovation can be nurtured.

2. Research into LTAs

2.1. The 2008 survey

In 1909, an international conference was organised in Paris with the purpose of bringing together LTAs from across the world in order to address the innovative language teaching developments occurring at that time, such as the practical focus on learning to *speak* other languages (Freudenstein 2009). As a consequence of the political turmoil in Europe that ensued, the next conference was only held in 1931, this time with the purpose of launching the first international LTA catering for teachers of any language, at the instigation of the Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, the predecessor of UNESCO. This new association, the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes/International Federation of Language Teacher Associations (FIPLV), was established with the aim of supporting innovation and collaboration between teachers of any languages taught across the world. It still has NGO status with UNESCO.

Almost one hundred years after the 1909 conference, an international survey was launched in 2008 as part of the LACS project (Language Associations and Collaborative Support), funded by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) and led by FIPLV. The survey explored the purposes and functions of LTAs, the challenges they faced and the strategies they were employing to address these challenges and, interestingly, it identified a high level of consensus amongst the participating LTAs. Lamb's (2012) analysis of the rich data was able to provide not only examples of LTA practices, but also theoretical insights, which have since informed research in this field. These included the frequently cited (e.g. Paran 2016; Slaughter, Bonar, and Keary 2022) conceptualisation of LTAs as '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' (Lamb 2012, 295), indicating internal and external functions. Internal functions included 'disseminating information about new policy developments, acting as a forum for teachers to share and develop effective practice, and providing in-service training by experts', whereas external functions included 'representation of teachers' views on policy-making bodies' (295). There was also consensus regarding the internal and external challenges faced by LTAs: internally, these consisted of funding concerns and a shortage of volunteers related to decreasing membership levels; external challenges included the declining status of language learning, particularly of languages other than English.

Nevertheless, the research also suggested that LTAs were responding to such challenges in significant ways. Firstly, in order to continue to meet members' changing needs and shifts in professional identities related to postmodern society (Lamb 2012, 290), LTAs had found ways of 'responding to change and unpredictability' by transforming into dynamic, de-hierarchical social networks, which, through the possibilities afforded by technology, 'are simultaneously flexible, innovative, interactive, easily accessible and time-efficient', allowing 'individual and specialised interests and 'knowledges' to flourish within the community' (Lamb 2012, 302). Secondly, by gradually becoming more involved in research themselves, LTAs were able to protect 'the LTA's identity as innovator at the forefront of development of the subject'. In his critical analysis of the data, Lamb (2012, 304) drew on spatial theories (e.g. Soja 1989) to consider LTAs as multidimensional spaces:

Such spaces need to serve many functions: accommodate diverse languages, educational sectors, interests and priorities; satisfy personal ambitions and professional development needs at the level of the individual and the group; be both flexible enough to cope with constant change and elastic enough to be able to expand to include newly emerging interest groups; offer both physical and virtual opportunities for interaction locally, nationally and internationally, connecting all levels; mediate both internally as well as externally in order to reflect and represent members' voices and to have an impact externally; yet provide a sense of shared space, inclusive and common to all.

This current article provides an opportunity to consider the ongoing trajectory of LTAs in relation to the global trends identified in 2012. Before turning to the research at the heart of this article, however, it is important to consider the ways in which scholarship on LTAs has developed since 2012.

2.2. Research on LTAs since 2012

Since 2012, there has been a significant increase in research publications related to LTAs, many of them referencing Lamb's (2012) paper. Some have taken a historical perspective, such as Rixon and Smith's (2017) history of IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), Lamb and Carvalho's (2018) explorations of IDV (Internationaler Deutschlehrerinnen – und Deutschlehrerverband), and Balboni and Porcelli's (2022) history of ANILS (Associazione Nazionale Insegnanti Lingue Straniere) in Italy. Two collections of papers focused on English language teacher associations (ELTAs) in a wide range of contexts have also been published, one a special issue of *ELT Journal* (Paran 2016) and the other an edited volume (Elsheikh, Coombe, and Effiong 2018).

Both contain research on a range of themes, mostly related to the internal-facing functions of LTAs, such as professional development activities, conferences, ELT-facilitated research, LTA structures and leadership development.

The imperative for internal activities to meet members' diverse needs clearly persists, with Slaughter, Bonar, and Keary (2022, 282) reiterating that 'highly situated' LTAs 'must be cognizant of and responsive to evolving challenges for their associations and membership, including but not limited to policy, resourcing and pedagogical issues'. An example provided in this study of LTAs in Australia is the increasing provision of intensive English lessons for refugee and migrant children. Some publications focus on the challenges for national LTAs in providing for their members in geographically demanding contexts, such as Gnawali's (2016) article on NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association) and Cameron's (2021) on Rwanda, where the task of staying updated in the context of rapid shifts in language teaching approaches is made more challenging by the geographical barriers teachers face when attempting to connect with other teachers. Other authors explore the theme of international collaboration, e.g. Elsheikh, Coombe, and Effiong (2018) on the formation of Africa TESOL, and Rahman and Shahabuddin (2018) on collaboration among South Asian LTAs.

Of particular relevance to FIPLV as an international federation is Motteram's (2016) article on the 2011 and 2015 IATEFL surveys of (mostly) individual members, which addressed the challenge for an association of meeting individual needs on an international level. Of particular interest was the shift in IATEFL's membership from predominantly UK expatriates still living and working overseas or having returned to the UK, to a more diverse membership with increasing numbers of members not from the UK, living and working in the country in which they were born. The research focused mostly on internal activities, with an inductive analysis revealing two distinct themes within these: 'instrumental' related to conference attendance and knowledge development; and 'belonging and identity', which included the five sub-themes of community, networking, continuing professional development (CPD), personal development and demonstrating professionalism. Though Lamb (2012) had referred to an LTA's role in developing a sense of professional identity, Motteram's research suggested that a deeper, more holistic, personal yet collective sense of identity needs to be considered by an international LTA:

An organization like IATEFL, it could be argued, has an offering that matches members' changing views of their own individual identities, one that transcends local boundaries. Indeed, in a world fractured by endless conflicts, globally oriented organizations such as IATEFL might be seen as a uniting force, offering members a stable identity in one part of their lives. Membership is an aspect both of their identity as a teacher and of their sense of belonging and identity in the wider world (Motteram 2016, 152).

Motteram's insights into the importance of developing a sense of belonging on an international level, raises the question of how to do so effectively. In order to address this, he described the actions taken by IATEFL, which increased inclusivity by offering more opportunities to participate in activities online as well as by supporting local projects in order to achieve more sustainable local development.

Such responses to challenges facing LTAs are powerful illustrations of Lamb's (2012) positioning of LTAs as multidimensional spaces, agile enough to cater for increasingly changing and diversifying needs in different contexts, developing new forms of professional and collective identity as well as opportunities for teacher (and LTA)

empowerment. In their recent study of the historical development of LTAs in Estonia from Soviet times to the twenty-first Century, Meristo, Oder, and Velberg (2023) have also referred to such themes in exploring the role of LTAs in fostering 'a collective sense of community and professional development' (1000), which can develop a sense of 'collective belongingness' (1001). In so doing, they draw on the construct of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), which, they argue, 'are considered to be important for sustaining teacher agency' (1005). In defining teacher agency, they refer to Leijen et al.'s (2022, 603) proposal that agency cannot be understood as an individual characteristic but, from an ecological perspective, requires an engagement with 'cultural, structural, and material conditions, which can act as enablers, constraints, or resources for teachers' actions'.

Since 2012, in fact, research on LTAs has increasingly engaged with critical notions of agency in relation to professionalism in the context of powerful forces, which can constrain the autonomy of teachers to act in ways that their professional stance demands (Jiménez, Lamb, and Vieira 2017). In an article on bilingual teacher associations in the USA, Bonilla (2017, 304) describes the US neoliberal context, in which teachers are being de-professionalised by 'schools' increasing use of technocratic curricula and institutional controls [...] driven by standardized goals'. High levels of control and restrictions are understood to be impacting teachers' 'confidence and belief in their professional judgment and ability to teach bilingual students in ways that meet the students' needs'. Though this affects the general teaching profession, bilingual teachers are considered to be 'additionally subjected to increasing pressure to impose an accelerated English monolingualism'. Bonilla argues, however, that teacher associations are able to 'counteract these dehumanizing practices by supporting agentic professional identities and helping members imagine and implement greater pedagogic agency' (Bonilla 2017, 304), which he refers to as 'relational agency', 'a perceived and cultivated ability to act with others to promote or put into action the goals and desires of the group' (305) and which supports the development of 'relational professional bilingual teacher identities' (310).

Such explorations of power relations echo Lamb's (2012) discussion of the extent to which LTAs themselves are producers of knowledge or simply disseminators of knowledge, with a focus on the curriculum. This was further explored by Stewart and Miyahara (2016), who adopted Foucault's (1980) construct of power/knowledge to explore what role the many English LTAs in Japan play in the development of knowledge, including curriculum, research and publication. They concluded, however, that the majority 'may play a limited role in enhancing teacher autonomy to the extent that they act primarily as conduits of commercially or state-produced knowledge' (Stewart and Miyahara 2016, 146).

One mechanism that may compromise LTAs' position as collective professional agents is mentioned by Paran (2016), who argues that the role of LTAs as knowledge producers can be compromised by reliance on funding from external sources, such as government agencies, which may lead to the loss of control over their LTA activities (Paran 2016, 134). The need for LTAs to reflect critically on their own historical perspectives, practices and alliances leads to a consideration of literature exploring approaches to decolonisation.

The influence of historical power relations on present cultures and practices and the need to question critically this dynamic has been the focus of a number of publications on LTAs since 2012, particularly those focused on English Language Teaching (ELT). Attention is frequently paid to the 'hegemony of "global" or "centre" ELT approaches and

materials developed outside the teaching contexts in which they are expected to be used', which are 'not necessarily appropriate to and do not [necessarily] recognize teachers' and other insiders' experience and expertise in those contexts' (Banegas et al. 2022, 70). In order to address this, empowerment of teachers through 'decentring ELT' is proposed. Kuchah and Salama (2022, 211), for example, reflect on the role of localised mentoring within LTAs in Africa as a way of enhancing teacher agency and challenging pedagogies that are 'driven by ideas and resources generated from other contexts'. Banegas et al. (2022) provide examples of bottom-up initiatives from Argentina, Cameroon, Chile, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, India and Nepal, which include not only localisation of practices and conferences, providing opportunities for local practitioners to share their expertise, but also the development of research on issues of relevance conducted by the LTAs themselves. Kuchah and Smith (2018) also describe the development of 'TA-research' (teacher association research) (64) by CAMELTA (Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers Association), which eventually took the form of 'collective action research' (64) into the everyday challenges teachers face and led to a 'shift in identity and sense of self-worth for those teachers who have become actively involved' (66).

Before concluding this literature review, it is important to highlight an area in need of further attention. Smith and Kuchah (2016, 215) have connected TA-research to the external facing role of LTAs as policy influencers, proposing that it can support them to 'exert collective pressure for change'. There is, of course, evidence that LTAs are themselves directly involved in advocacy (e.g. Swanson and Mason 2018) but there has been 'little unpacking of what advocacy work involves' (Slaughter, Bonar, and Keary 2022, 299) through research. This will be considered in this paper, drawing on the one publication identified that focuses on advocacy (Pentón Herrera 2022).

3. Research methodology

In order to generate data on LTAs efficiently, a convenience sampling approach was employed. Following ethical approval by the University Research Ethics Committee of the first author's university, the survey was circulated to all FIPLV member associations via email invitation, which explained the purpose of the study and the types of questions covered. Participation was voluntary and consent to participate was implied by questionnaire completion. The participants completing the survey were representatives of their LTA, mostly in executive positions and therefore providing a specific management perspective and insights into the strategic priorities and governance of these associations.

The survey (accessible on the FIPLV website) included a number of questions (tick boxes or open) aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. How do LTAs currently conceptualise their internal and external functions?
2. What types of activities do they organise or participate in?
3. How do they define the challenges they face?
4. What strategies are they employing to address these challenges?
5. What notable successes have they achieved?
6. What are the main funding sources for LTAs, and how do they support their activities?
7. What role do LTAs play in language education, and how do they impact language teaching practices globally?

The survey was an adapted version of the questionnaire developed by Lamb (2012) and later adapted for use by other researchers (e.g. Stewart and Miyahara 2016). It was first piloted, then circulated in English, French, and German, remaining open for three months.

The survey was completed by a total of 40 associations that are either direct FIPLV members or affiliated through their membership of umbrella LTAs who are members of FIPLV. The LTAs can be classified according to scope of activity, geographical region, and language representation. In terms of scope, LTAs can be either national associations, focusing their activities mainly within a single country, or international federations of national associations, functioning across multiple countries. The geographical regions represented in the survey include Europe, the Asia-Pacific, the Americas, and Africa. The LTAs can also be described as either unilingual (focusing on one language) or multilingual (working with multiple languages). The responses were provided by 16 national unilingual associations, four international unilingual associations, representing German, English, Russian, and Esperanto, 19 national multilingual associations and one international multilingual association. In referring to the participants, the following codes are used: country (if national) or acronym (if international), language focus (unilingual/multilingual), and survey year (e.g. Norway, uni, 2024; IDV, uni, 2024). Where multiple associations operate in one country, alphabetical suffixes are added (e.g. Australia, uni, 2024a).

Survey data were later supplemented by integrating them with themes emerging from two in-depth group discussions involving 13 representatives of FIPLV member associations from around the globe. These took place in two settings: face to face, in July 2024 in Auckland, during the NZALT (New Zealand Association of Language Teachers) Conference and FIPLV World Congress; and a follow-up, online meeting held in March 2025, which also included a discussion of the interim findings of the survey, thus providing an opportunity for data validation. The meetings were recorded with informed consent obtained from all participants. They were organised within the framework of an ongoing collaborative FIPLV project, which brought member associations together to discuss language policy issues with the aim of producing a joint position paper on priorities for language education. These meetings created a collaborative dialogic space for participants to exchange ideas, examine common and unique challenges and discuss strategies that extended beyond the scope of the survey. Furthermore, they revealed the importance of the global-local dialogue between association leaders and the role of global collective advocacy in addressing challenges.

As a result, a rich corpus of quantitative and qualitative data was generated, addressing the above research questions. The data analysis presented in this section integrates the survey responses with data from the two meetings, which were transcribed and coded thematically. We adopted Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) (Morgan and Nica 2020) to analyse survey and discussion data. First of all, we drew on the literature review, including Lamb's (2012) article, which provided the basis for our provisional themes. Through the ITI process these tentative themes were iteratively refined, modified, and validated against patterns emerging from the data. In addition to providing data on the current situation, the parallels between the 2008 and 2024 surveys enabled a consideration of any changes in LTA activity and in the global context of language education since 2008, which is the focus of this paper.

4. Data analysis and discussion: language teacher associations as spaces for critical collective autonomy and innovation

As in Lamb (2012), this paper adopts a pragmatic approach to data presentation, analysis and discussion by integrating these three elements (Burnard et al. 2008). A limitation is that not all data will be included here but this decision allows for a more in-depth discussion. The complete data analysis is available on the FIPLV website. This section begins by exploring the changing context of language education, before delving into five dimensions of how, in this context, LTA internal and external practices are developing.

4.1. The changing context of language education

In recent years, the world has seen increasing political polarisation, rising migration, intensifying internationalisation of education, unprecedented advances in technology, and shifting sociopolitical spaces (OECD 2025; UNESCO 2019, 2021). In this context, the research participants expressed a shared concern about the declining status of languages in their educational systems. Across various countries, a persistent lack of political will to engage with language education and multilingualism was recognised by participants both in the survey and during the discussions, e.g. 'Politicians do not really care that much about languages in our country, which makes influencing quite difficult.' (Canada, multi, 2024). This is exacerbated when 'policy decisions are susceptible to change frequently, or at short notice and according to the views of individuals' (UK, multi, 2024). In many cases, this policy ambivalence has led to reductions in curriculum time for languages. In some countries, the rise of populism was seen to contribute to the erosion of support for (linguistic) diversity and the narrowing of public discourse on the value of languages, as discussed in the online meeting. LTA representatives reported pronounced disparities between language education provision in urban and rural areas. In Colombia, for instance, 'one of these challenges is [...] the professional development of the rural and elementary teachers. They are professional teachers who need support in sharing their practices with the community and also enriching them' (Colombia, uni, 2024). In the meantime, ongoing teacher shortages, especially the lack of qualified language teachers, remain acute, e.g. 'Wenige Anzahl von Lehrkräften und eine Mehrheit von ihnen, die die deutsche Sprache unterrichten, haben keine Qualifizierung dafür' (Chile, uni, 2024).¹ This is exacerbated by low teacher retention, in some cases related to low teacher salaries: 'Bei Lehrenden besteht die größte Herausforderung darin, dass das Gehalt für den Lebensunterhalt nicht ausreicht' (Vietnam, uni, 2024).² These issues are particularly pressing in geographically and socially restricted contexts, where there is limited access to language teaching resources and declining interest in language learning. As LTA leaders from Togo and Burundi explained: 'Mangel an deutsche und aktuelle Bücher für die Lernenden' (Togo, uni, 2024)³; 'Les gens ignorent les langues et préfèrent apprendre des cours pratiques car avec eux ils pourront gagner de l'argent' (Burundi, uni, 2024).⁴

As in the 2008 survey, the participants expressed concerns about the global dominance of English; for example: 'Die Konkurrenz mit Englisch ist total enorm und erfolglos' (Chile, uni, 2024).⁵ As one Finnish participant recognised, the main challenge to be addressed by LTAs nowadays is the lack of 'value given to knowing more than just one

foreign language' (Finland, multi, 2024). These are not new concerns (Sorger 2018), but they have acquired renewed urgency in the contemporary context of globalisation and the hegemony of English. The challenge is, however, further deepened by the 'importation' of ELT models developed elsewhere. These tendencies result in ignoring local expertise and marginalising pedagogical approaches developed within (and responsive to) specific linguistic, cultural and educational contexts.

Several participants in the online FIPLV meeting drew attention to another trend since 2008 by questioning the implementation of 'generic frameworks' in their educational systems, i.e. the radical move towards 'holistic' or 'generic pedagogies' for use in all disciplines. The participants argued that this risks diluting the distinctive approaches required for language teaching and can lead to 'deprofessionalisation' of language education. This mirrors Bonilla's (2017) observations about the pressures of standardisation in bilingual education, which subjects language teachers to extreme curriculum and organisational control that undermines culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies.

It is not surprising that the majority of LTAs in the survey identified the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and related digital tools as among the most pressing current issues. In the USA context, for instance, '[t]he appropriate use of AI in language acquisition' (USA, multi, 2024) remains a priority. Participants commented on the rise of new opportunities for technological advancement, global connectivity, inclusion and transnational exchange, some triggered by the global pandemic (see also Hatoss, Nordstrom, and Lamb 2024; Kormpas and Coombe 2023); but they also mentioned challenges, including a deepening of existing inequalities, e.g. access to technology and training, especially in rural or underfunded settings.

As can be seen in the following sections, these global developments raised by the participants are reflected in the diverse ways in which LTAs are actively working to support educators, change language policy, and maintain their own status in a field that is undergoing a radical transformation in the way language learning is conceptualised, delivered, and valued.

4.2. *Spaces for manoeuvre*

This research demonstrates an impressive consistency over time in relation to the functions of LTAs. This consistency not only provides empirical support for the reliability of both data sets but also suggests an enduring pattern characterising the professional identity of LTAs and a shared understanding of their two-fold role as both internally oriented towards their members' needs and externally engaged in advocacy for languages and language education. For instance, in the 2024 survey, 90% of the participants saw 'acting as a forum for teachers to share best practices' as the most important function of their association, while 83% emphasised 'representing teachers' views in policymaking.'

In the Australian context, for example, the LTA's main role is perceived as 'a forum for teachers to disseminate good practice,' adding that '[t]eachers supporting teachers in best practice adds to their efficacy as teachers and to continue on in their profession' (Australia, multi, 2024a). Similarly, in Estonia, teachers valued opportunities for 'school visits and getting to know what is done in other regions ... sharing experiences' (Estonia, multi, 2024). Such observations position LTAs as facilitators of collaborative networks, which can contribute to teacher retention and sustained motivation (Lamb 2000).

Beyond these individual benefits, LTAs themselves also function as networked spaces, enabling 'collaboration and cooperation with umbrella and sister organisations' (Bulgaria, uni, 2024). Drawing on Leijen, Pedaste, and Baucal (2022), it is evident that shared resources and mutual support within and across associations foster both professional agency and collective identity. International collaboration was valued by most participants, with one commenting on the importance of 'international conferences ... to enhance international collaboration and networking' (Slovenia, multi, 2024). In line with Wenger et al.'s (2002) notion of communities of practice, such interactions illustrate that collaboration, mutual support, and agency extend beyond individual members to the associations themselves.

In a publication on critical teacher autonomy, Lamb (2000, 127) argued that 'teachers need to understand the constraints on their practice but, rather than feeling disempowered, they need to empower themselves by finding the spaces and opportunities for manoeuvre'. This idea was later expanded by Lamb and Vodicka (2018, 10), who introduced the construct of 'critical collective autonomy' to 'explore autonomy as a political, collectivist construct, interwoven with space/place and with communities and networks rather than individuals as the basic unit'. Though this was initially developed to explore language communities in urban contexts, who collectively and autonomously create spaces to ensure that their languages continue to be learnt, it is also possible to interpret LTAs as such.

The findings of the present study confirm that LTAs open up such spaces for manoeuvre for language educators by enabling them to act as collaborative and critically autonomous professionals, effectively balancing the constraints and affordances of the contextual variables of contemporary language education. Hence, LTAs can be perceived not merely as forums for professional dialogue but as agile, multidimensional spaces in which educators can achieve and exercise agency, share expertise, and build their professional identities within supportive networks (cf. Lamb 2012). Further evidence of this will be found in the next sections.

4.3. LTAs as knowledge producers: research and innovation

The emphasis on LTAs as spaces in which teachers can collaborate demonstrates their internal function in strengthening professional communities and empowering members through collaborative professional learning. This mutual exchange of expertise forms the foundation upon which innovation can flourish and reflects Lamb's (2012) view that LTAs should be *producers of knowledge* rather than mere conduits.

An important insight from the present study is that there is a significant shift since 2008 in LTAs' involvement with research. As Lamb (2012, 297) observed, many LTA representatives felt that 'engaging in research was beyond their capacity, as their efforts were primarily directed toward recruiting and retaining members'. The 2024 data indicate that research is now viewed as central to LTA activity. In the survey, 50% of LTAs reported carrying out research and 48% stated that the publication of journals was their main CPD strategy, though the in-depth meeting discussions revealed that, in some cases, this consists more of promoting the increasing amounts of research conducted by teachers than conducting research themselves (e.g. Bulgaria, New Zealand). Research is increasingly perceived as important for supporting professional development, influencing policy, and

enhancing LTAs' legitimacy within broader educational and political networks. LTAs engage with research in order to create spaces for the co-construction and dissemination of new knowledge and implementation of innovative practices. This shift is captured in the activities of an Australian association aimed at 'giving teachers opportunities to disseminate their research with the new publication series named *LCNAU Studies in Languages and Cultures*' (Australia, multi, 2024b). The survey demonstrates how associations can, in this way, enhance both individual professional identity and the collective reputation of the association and the profession. LTAs are creating spaces for manoeuvre that enable teachers as both practitioners and researchers to shape the discourse of their field, thus strengthening the link between research and classroom practice. Some associations are seeking funds to establish research centres, such as in Burundi: 'Notre association avait été financée dans la construction du centre de recherche et d'apprentissage de la langue espéranto au Burundi' (Burundi, uni, 2024).⁶ However, while such efforts reflect a growing commitment to research capacity building, they also raise important questions about LTA autonomy and sustainability. As Paran (2016) cautions, externally funded initiatives, however promising, may bring potential dependencies that limit grassroots agency. This tension highlights a broader challenge for LTAs in under-resourced environments – namely, to balance the need for accessing financial support for their organisational development with the need for maintaining their autonomy and member interests.

Such approaches reveal LTAs as spaces for innovation, where, increasingly, practitioner-led research is probing questions and offering relevant pedagogical ideas in particular educational contexts. The concept of innovation in language education has often been understood through the lens of the adoption of new technologies, pedagogical models, or curricular reforms (e.g. Carless 2013). However, it can be seen that innovation emerges not from externally imposed change but from iterative, collaborative processes in which teachers critically explore their own practice (Borg 2013). In this sense, teacher research itself can be considered an open door to innovation, both in its outcomes and its redefinition of language teachers' professional identities.

4.4. Technological developments: opportunities and challenges

In the post-Covid era, the role of LTAs in sustaining innovation, empowerment and inclusivity has attained unprecedented significance. Many participants highlighted post-Covid successes that reflect both LTAs' resilience and capacity to innovate. Professional learning and collaboration facilitated by LTAs again appears central to this process: 'Die Integration der neuesten Lehrmethoden in die Unterrichtspraxis seitens unserer Verbandsmitglieder infolge ihrer Teilnahme an unseren Fortbildungsinitiativen und eines fruchtbaren Austausches mit anderen Kollegen' (Italy, multi, 2024).⁷ In such ways, the development of professional networks can transform technological challenges into opportunities for collective empowerment.

Survey data reveal, however, that the accelerated technological developments not only offer numerous opportunities but also present new and intricate challenges that require radical pedagogical innovation, creativity and ethical consideration. Some participants pointed to the tension between using 'traditional' and digital methods: 'Dealing with all the modern tools (e.g. tools based on AI and ICT) available, and, parallelly,

using 'ordinary' but well-functioning techniques (e.g. personal meetings, printed books)' (Hungary, multi, 2024). The need to integrate AI meaningfully into teaching practices was well evidenced: e.g. 'Der wachsende Einfluss der künstlichen Intelligenz auf das Sprachenlernen und die Notwendigkeit einer erfolgreichen Integration derselben in die Unterrichtspraxis' (Italy, multi, 2024).⁸ Hence, the concern is not only the need for technological literacy, but for developing the capacity to implement pedagogical innovations without jeopardising the human, interpersonal and cultural dimensions of language learning and teaching. In Slovenia, the challenge of the 'integration of AI' is now as important as the 'predominance of English' (Slovenia, multi 2024) – a comment linking the two explicitly and raising questions about whether the widespread use of technological tools is also associated with linguistic hegemonies. At the same time, in the Irish context, a participant foresaw 'the impact that AI may have in the future on written projects when these are introduced as part of the continuous assessment at Senior Cycle level' (Ireland, uni, 2024). These perspectives resonate strongly with Lamb's (2012) earlier observation that LTAs act as mediating spaces in which policy and practice are negotiated, but with the added urgency to steer the demands of the exponential technological breakthroughs that are reshaping the language teaching profession at unprecedented speed.

4.5. *Interlingual shared spaces*

In 2024, the need for LTAs to create 'interlingual shared spaces'⁹ (Lamb 2015; Lamb and Vodicka 2018) is still strongly felt. Beyond meeting members' professional development needs, LTAs act as sites where teachers collectively assert their voices, collaborating across languages and contexts. As Lamb (2012) described, LTAs are 'spaces where the isolation of language teachers of languages other than English can be overcome' (295).

The 2024 data extend this vision and reveal LTAs behaving in critically and collectively autonomous ways to actively promote multilingualism and cultural diversity. As interlingual spaces, LTAs facilitate multilingual dialogue, cultivate cultural literacy, and advocate for linguistic equity, promoting both individual and collective agency (cf. Lamb and Vodicka 2018). The data suggest that fostering collaboration between teachers of different languages is crucial: for the UK LTA, their most important function is 'Encouraging professionalism and collegiality including between languages' (UK, multi, 2024). Such multilingual collaboration is also seen as important for unilingual associations. Initiatives such as 'Förderung von DAF/DaZ im Kontext der Mehrsprachigkeit/Förderung der internationalen Zusammenarbeit' (IDV, uni, 2024)¹⁰ illustrate how associations can create interlingual spaces that transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

Given that the promotion of multilingualism is closely associated with resisting the hegemony of English, activities that confront global ELT paradigms and assert other 'foreign' and local languages reveal a marked decolonial turn. Associations use various strategies to respond to this challenge. In Lithuania, for example, one initiative aims at 'creating a handbook for teachers to teach mediation in English language lessons' (Lithuania, multi, 2024) in order to introduce mediation as a strategy to develop students' multilingual skills, as well as to raise learners' awareness of the distinctive features of both the first and the foreign language. LTAs also promote heritage and so-called minority languages through conferences and other events (e.g. Māori in New Zealand and Bulgarian in Bulgaria). The Icelandic Association of Mother Tongues (Móðurmál) challenges



linguistic hierarchies through its main function: 'community work with mother-language schools' and many initiatives such as the setting up of 'a multilingual library Móðurmál' (Iceland, multi, 2024).

These strategies promote concrete decolonial practices not only by celebrating linguistic diversity but also by actively opposing global hierarchies that privilege English and other dominant/majority languages. It seems then that LTAs are actively advancing decolonisation agendas by foregrounding multilingualism as a right and by emphasising the importance of local home/heritage languages.

4.6. Advocacy and critical collective autonomy

In 2012, Lamb noted that LTAs saw 'influencing policy' as their most important external-facing function. This pivotal role has not only persisted but expanded in 2024, with advocacy woven across multiple dimensions of association life. In 2012, the participant from Finland described this function as follows: 'To safeguard and to try to improve the rights and well-being of our members' (Finland, multi, 2012). Clearly, over the past decade, the same multilingual association has mobilised a range of advocacy initiatives: 'When we have been able to stop municipal or other projects to narrow down the amount of languages on offer at certain educational levels (primary school, etc.), when we have succeeded to keep language learning importance in media and public discussion' (Finland, multi, 2024).

Evidence from the 2024 survey reveals LTAs employing diverse advocacy strategies, with the most frequent including writing letters to policymakers (73%) and organising meetings (63%): 'other' strategies include involving policymakers in conferences or association meetings and presenting research. One example is a Russian LTA, which seeks to influence decision-making through 'presentation of results of sociolinguistic research to policymakers' (Russia, uni, 2024).

The survey responses demonstrate a shift from reactive lobbying to proactive, evidence-based advocacy, which can be interpreted as a tool to support the critical collective autonomy of LTAs, finding the spaces for manoeuvre in the context of declining government engagement. LTAs, where possible, are now operating as collective forces and solid actors in policy spaces in response to pressing issues such as declining language programme support, teacher shortages, and the marginalisation of multilingualism. The various advocacy efforts of LTAs reflect Pentón Herrera's (2022) framework of four advocacy types (institution-focused, member-focused, learner-focused, and language-focused), which can be seen in the following examples.

Institution-focused advocacy (advocacy for the organisation/association) is evident in associations' efforts to sustain their visibility and legitimacy. This can be achieved through networking initiatives which strengthen organisational power and resilience: 'Regroupement des associations françaises du domaine de la DDL dans un collectif (CAPAEL), dont l'Acedle a été à l'initiative' (France, multi, 2024).¹¹ By collaborating with others, associations gain more visibility and amplify their voice. As Allen (2025) argues, power is not merely held but assembled through relational proximities; such networking enables LTAs to position themselves within broader topologies of influence, where presence and recognition are co-produced even across transnational spaces.

Member-focused advocacy centres on representing teachers' voices and supporting their professional needs, as already noted above. In the Icelandic context the LTA was particularly active in 'commenting on bills, strategy papers, participating in strategy making in work groups' (Iceland, multi, 2024). In Estonia, a more radical approach was adopted: 'In January teachers' strike was organized to influence policymakers' (Estonia, multi, 2024).

Learner-focused advocacy appears in efforts to protect and promote language learning opportunities. In the survey, participants raised concerns such as: '[l]anguage programs are in jeopardy of closing' (USA, multi, 2024); '[s]everal universities have been dismantling their language programs...' (Australia, multi, 2024b); and '[d]ecision-makers prioritize other subjects over language education' (Bulgaria, uni, 2024). Such shared concerns were also a recurring topic in the LTA meetings aimed at developing a joint position paper to use nationally for advocacy purposes. In Bulgaria, as meeting participants further explained, language teaching hours at school, including those for English, 'are being reduced to prioritise mathematics and science subjects' (Bulgaria, uni, 2024). These comments demonstrate LTAs' commitment to advocate for access to quality language education for learners in the face of institutional and political neglect.

Another focus of the joint position paper is language-focused advocacy. Advocacy here argues for more languages to be included on the curriculum, including home/heritage languages, and challenging hierarchies that privilege English. An example of the need for this came from the New Zealand participant: 'Fremdsprachen haben es schwer in englischsprechenden Ländern, und Deutsch ist Nummer drei unter den europäischen Sprachen nach Spanisch und Französisch' (New Zealand, uni, 2024).¹² As an example of language-focused advocacy, IDV provides a strong illustration through its development of the 2022 'Wiener Thesen zur Sprachenpolitik' (Fritz et al. 2023)¹³, which provides a concrete framework for promoting German and, more broadly, multilingualism.

The 2024 survey identifies that barriers to influencing policy have, if anything, increased, such as lack of access to policymakers, limited resources 'to dedicate to policy-influencing activities' (Slovenia, multi, 2024), and legal constraints restricting them from direct advocacy as major obstacles. In Vietnam, for instance, 'Gesetzlich ist uns nicht erlaubt, einen eigenständigen Verband zu etablieren [...] Für die vietnamesischen Behörden sind wir eher irrelevant' (Vietnam, uni, 2024).¹⁴ Nevertheless, advocacy has evolved into a distinct characteristic of the identity of LTAs as spaces for critical collective autonomy. Through Pentón Herrera's lens (2022), LTAs are not only defending their organisational value and credibility but also empowering teachers, lobbying for language learners, and promoting linguistic diversity. LTAs advocate through collaborative campaigns and strategic partnerships, embodying Allen's (2025) notion of power as relational and spatially distributed. More specifically, the strategy of involving policymakers in conferences and meetings can be interpreted through Allen's (2025) spatial theory of power as a subtle yet effective form of empowerment. 'Power is inherently spatial', according to Allen (2025), therefore the associations do not simply work towards gaining access, they autonomously create spaces for critical collective autonomy, where power is co-produced through interaction, visibility, and shared discourse. In doing so, they transform the topography of decision-making into a topology of negotiated presence, enabling LTAs to shape policy not from the margins but from within.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored changes in LTAs' internal and external activities on local, national and international levels, as well as in the contextual developments and challenges for language educators and LTAs themselves since the first global research into multilingual and unilingual language teacher associations (LTAs) was conducted in 2008 (Lamb 2012). Five thematic dimensions have emerged, which, despite being similar to those identified in Lamb (2012), suggest that the opportunities and, particularly, the challenges identified by the LTA representatives appear heightened by the major political, economic, social, and technological global shifts and events, shaping the context in which LTAs operate.

There are, of course, limitations on the research as explored in this article. Firstly, the intention was to discuss the changes as illustrated by the data in the research, rather than to provide a comprehensive presentation of the findings. It has therefore not been possible to present the data completely; these will be made available on the FIPLV website. A further limitation is that the participants in the research were officers on the LTA executive boards rather than the general membership. However, these are not only volunteer LTA leaders, but also language educators, so it can be assumed that, in addition to their comprehensive inside understanding of their associations' functions and identity and the contexts which they are navigating, they bring a practitioner perspective.

In conclusion, as member associations, LTAs constantly have to find innovative ways of addressing members' diverse and constantly shifting needs in order to maintain their legitimacy and effectiveness. The research suggests that LTAs continue to address this challenge through the creation of dynamic multidimensional, collective spaces for their members, which enable language educators and the LTAs themselves to play an agentic role in collaborative knowledge creation and innovation.

However, it is clear that the positioning of languages in society and education has become even more challenging. LTAs are, nevertheless, seen to be resilient in maintaining their own and their members' professional identity as autonomous and forward-looking professional communities. This is demonstrated in this paper through the lens of 'critical collective autonomy' (Lamb and Vodicka 2018), which enables the LTAs and their members collectively to reflect critically on the constraints they face, such as curricular and pedagogic requirements, the devaluing of multilingualism, and the challenges of AI, and to find the spaces for manoeuvre to assert their professional knowledge and values. Critical collective autonomy is understood to be generated by opportunities to nurture and reinforce individual and collective professional identities through collaborative professional development and innovation, building of self-worth and confidence, and spaces for autonomy. Examples of this include opportunities to engage in and share research and the provision of collective interlingual spaces to challenge the increasing hegemony of English.

The data further suggest that, in many contexts and for diverse reasons, opportunities for LTAs to represent their members in policy-making forums are decreasing. Nevertheless, LTAs, as critically and collectively autonomous organisations, continue to find the spaces for manoeuvre, increasingly turning to new forms of advocacy as a way of representing their members' voices. Allen's (2025) concept of 'power's quiet reach' helps explain how LTAs now engage in advocacy: not always through direct confrontation or

hierarchical authority, but through relational proximities, networked influence, and assemblage-like collaborations that allow them to 'make their presence felt' in policy spaces without always being formally invited or included.

In terms of future research, it is clear that developments in AI are driving innovations in language education, but its long-term effects need to be monitored, including the ways in which LTAs themselves may engage with it. Further research will also involve a deeper dive into the ways in which advocacy can be managed and supported effectively.

This article has charted the priorities of LTAs through practice and theory. It has added to our understanding of the complexities they face and the ways in which they empower their members and maintain validity, including through advocacy. Indeed, both their internal and external practices can be understood from Allen's (2025) theoretical perspective: namely that their strength and empowerment emerges from their capacity to assemble, hold together and sustain shifting but collective spaces that create professional agency.

Notes

1. 'A limited number of teachers and many of those who teach German have no qualifications for it' (Chile, uni, 2024).
2. 'The main challenge for teachers is that the salary is not enough to cover living expenses" (Vietnam, uni, 2024).
3. 'Lack of up-to-date German books for learners" (Togo, uni, 2024).
4. 'People dismiss languages and prefer attending practical courses because with those they will be able to earn money' (Burundi, uni, 2024).
5. "The competition with English is very fierce and largely ineffective" (Chile, uni, 2024).
6. "Our association received funding to set up the Esperanto language research and learning centre in Burundi" (Burundi, uni, 2024).'
7. 'The integration of the latest teaching methods into teaching practices by our association members as a result of their participation in our professional development initiatives and a fruitful dialogue with other colleagues" (Italy, multi, 2024).
8. 'The increasing influence of artificial intelligence on language learning and the need for its successful integration into teaching practice' (Italy, multi, 2024).
9. For an exploration of the concept of 'interlinguality', see Lamb 2015.
10. 'Promotion of German as a Foreign/Second Language (DaF/DaZ) in a multilingual context / Advancing international collaboration" (IDV, uni, 2024).
11. 'French associations are brought together in groups in the field of DDL into a collective (CAPAEL), launched by Acedle" (France, multi, 2024).
12. "Foreign languages are not valued in English-speaking countries, and German ranks third among European languages after Spanish and French" (New Zealand, uni, 2024).
13. Vienna Theses on Language Policy.
14. 'Legally, we are not allowed to establish an independent association [...] and, from the perspective of the Vietnamese authorities, we are largely considered irrelevant" (Vietnam, uni, 2024).

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