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Teaching associations and professionalism

Wayne Rimmer and Alan Floyd

Although teaching associations (TAs) have been aligned to professionalism, there is little evidence to support their actual role in developing EFL teachers' sense of being a professional. This study explores this purported relationship through content analysis of interviews with ten members of TAs and nine non-members. Three themes emerged: status, how TAs contribute to teachers' sense of self-worth; CPD, how TAs allow teachers to acquire competencies relevant to professionalism; Impact, the influence of TAs on the professionalism of EFL as a field. Regarding status, non-members rejected members' commitment to TA membership as confirmation of professionalism. However, all teachers agreed TAs made a considerable contribution to professionalism through CPD. Concerning Impact, the only consensus was that too few teachers are aware of TAs for them to be significant. Our findings suggest that TAs can play a role in professionalism provided they remain relevant to teachers' changing contexts and consider non-members' interests.

Introduction

Teaching associations (TAs) have been described as 'networks of professionals, run by and for professionals, focused mainly on support for members' (Lamb 2012: 295). Furthermore, on their mission statements and promotional materials, TAs frequently self-identify with professionalism. For example, the strapline on the website of IATEFL is 'linking, developing and supporting English Language Teaching *professionals* worldwide' [emphasis added] while the TESOL Spain website lists the fact that it is 'dedicated exclusively to the *professional* needs and interests of English language teachers in Spain' [emphasis added] as the first member benefit. In addition, a special edition of this journal dedicated to TAs (Hall and Paran 2016) posits a positive relationship between TAs and professionalism. However, while this assumed link may be well-intentioned, there is little evidence, positive or otherwise, to support this claim. Indeed, TAs hardly feature in the literature at all: in their history of IATEFL Rixon and Smith (2017: 150) concede that '[t]he few previous studies of the history of ELT and its role in the global context are disappointingly sparing in their discussions of IATEFL or other teaching associations'. The purpose of this empirically-based

article is to address this knowledge gap and contribute to our understanding of this important area by exploring the putative link between teaching associations and professionalism.

Given that the pretensions of EFL to professionalism are frequently questioned, even by practitioners themselves (Johnston, 1997, reports teachers' disillusionment with EFL as a career option), TAs may function as a viable conduit to professionalism. However, alongside the lack of extant research on TAs, there is also insufficient articulation of what construct of professionalism TAs subscribe to and provide to members. TAs aside, professionalism as a theoretical construct is still developing in EFL, a fact which Canagarajah (2016) ascribes in part to the field's relative recent emergence as compared to more established disciplines. Indeed, the concept has been extensively profiled in the literature on general education with Evetts (2003) noting an overall epistemological shift away from aligning professionalism with the traditional vocations, chiefly law and medicine, towards regarding it as a dynamic system based on the interplay of competencies, the requisite knowledge and skill set; and values, beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning.

Evetts (2003) has proved a convincing account of professionalism which is based on practice; for example, Sachs (2016) concurs that performance is the key dimension to interpreting professionalism, while remaining sensitive to contextual factors. Crucially, professionalism is perceptual rather than absolute, consistent with Evans' (2008) influential definition of professionalism:

> [Professionalism is] practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice. (p. 29)

This definition is robust in an EFL context because its perceptual nature allows for the multiple environments in which EFL practitioners operate. 'Perceptions' is important because it is hardly possible to delineate and define the exact nature

of 'service' or 'expertise' in a field as diverse as EFL. When Evans later talks of enacting professionalism, she describes the process whereby teachers deploy their competencies and values to effect what is conceived as best practice in a specific classroom context (2011).

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to investigate how teachers perceive the impact of TAs on professionalism. Its significance is linked to the fact that the pretensions of TAs to professionalism have rarely been empirically tested. The few previous studies of TAs have shared two features. First, the standard method has been an analysis of responses from questionnaires, for example, Motteram (2016) drew on two chronologically separate surveys of IATEFL members. Second, without exception, the views of non-members of TAs have not been solicited. This second point seriously underrepresents teachers: a study by Blair (2014) in a general education context confirms that most teachers do not know what TAs are, let alone want to join them. This does not mean that the majority of teachers eschew professionalism. Most likely, they enact professionalism differently. Also, the possibility that non-members are cognizant with TAs but reject them as irrelevant to professionalism cannot be ruled out. Thus, it would seem that an exploration of the relationship between TAs and professionalism must also take into account the views of non-members, a gap in the literature which this study attempts to address.

This study thus represents a departure in that, in order to gather rich data to explore professionalism, interviews are preferred to questionnaires and, to address the previous lack of research on teachers who have not joined a TA, non-members are represented in the data. The purpose of this approach was to adopt a methodology which could capture participants' perceptions and experiences of professionalism more fully. Doubtless, there are many ways that professionalism can be established and TAs, if they offer that avenue, are but one stimulus or resource. But this is all the more reason that claims of TAs should be critically examined in order to understand their relative contribution, if any, to the complex jigsaw which defines a teacher's relationship to professionalism.

The study

The research question addressed in this study was, how do teachers perceive the impact of TAs on their sense of professionalism? To address this research question, the methodology adopted was informed by social constructivism and data were generated through interviews. The convenience sampling approach consisted of using one of the authors' network of professional contacts to approach teachers interested in being interviewed. Potential participants were contacted by email which included an information sheet outlining the study. At this stage teachers declared whether they were TA members in order to construct a balanced sample. The eventual sample consisted of ten EFL teachers who were current members of a local and / or international TA and nine teachers who were not. This is still a modest sample size in comparison to Lamb (op. cit.) but it was felt that through the use of in-depth interviews the sample was large enough to generate rich data. The profile of the teachers is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Country of employment	Employment sector	Teaching experience (years)	TA membership (in years)
1	Female	Japanese	Japan	Tertiary	23	IATEFL (19) & Japan Association for Language Teaching (9)
2	Female	Brazilian	Brazil	Private language school	13	IATEFL (8) & BRAZ-TESOL (8)
3	Female	USA	Germany	Freelance	27	TESOL International (23)
4	Male	Greek	UK	ESOL	11	National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (3)

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Country of employment	Employment sector	Teaching experience (years)	TA membership (in years)
5	Female	Bangladeshi	Bangladesh	Tertiary	23	IATEFL (10) & Bangladeshi English Language Teachers' Association (10)
6	Female	Moldovan	Ukraine	Private language school	4	TESOL-Ukraine (2)
7	Female	Chinese	UK	Secondary	8	IATEFL (6)
8	Male	Phillipines	Thailand	Primary	10	Thailand TESOL (7)
9	Male	UK	UK	Tertiary	12	Northern Association of TESOL (3)
10	Female	Polish	Poland	Private language school	5	IATEFL Poland (1)
11	Female	Italian	Italy	Tertiary	20	None
12	Female	Australian	Czech Republic	Freelance	13	None
13	Male	USA	USA	Secondary	10	None
14	Female	UK	Japan	Private language school	6	None
15	Female	South African	South Africa	Private language school	12	None
16	Female	India	UK	Secondary	29	None
17	Female	UK	Spain	Private language school	1	None
18	Male	UK	Korea	Freelance	11	None
19	Female	Russian	Russia	Tertiary	11	None

Prior to data collection, the study was cleared by an ethics committee and each participant provided written consent informed by a description of the purpose and use of their contribution.

Interviews were semi-structured and based on issues related to TAs and professionalism which had emanated from a review of relevant literature. Themes covered included whether they were part of a TA or not; reasons for

joining or not joining; benefits of membership; TAs impact on individuals and EFL as a profession; and possible changes to improve recruitment and retention. Each interview was conducted individually by Skype and lasted approximately one hour. The decision to adopt interviews was made on epistemological grounds: to address our research question, it was felt that participants' experiences and perceptions were key to understanding their attitude towards TAs and that these would be expressed more fully in an interview environment. The epistemological premise is that individuals' statements reflect a vision of reality which is determined both by their own personal views and experience and by larger social forces, for example the nature of the EFL industry, which impact and influence their experiences, thought processes and choices.

The interviews were then orthographically transcribed and analysed through Content Analysis. Content Analysis was chosen because it allows the researcher to engage fully with the data and focuses exploration of the discourse of the relationship between TAs and professionalism as seen through the prism of individuals' socially-constructed interpretation of their circumstances. Following the six-step approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), the Content Analysis involved an iterative process of reading the transcripts, coding the data, identifying recurrent themes relevant to teachers' perceptions of professionalism, and creating categories representing dimensions of these themes.

Three themes relevant to professionalism emerged: Status, CPD and Impact. Status refers to teachers' sense of self-worth as practitioners, the consciousness that their work and role is meaningful and appreciated, and the extent to which they feel their professionalism to be enhanced through membership of TAs. CPD represents the perception that TAs provide a route to competencies and skills that are relevant to professionalism. Impact is the degree of commitment to the view that TAs promote the professionalism of EFL as a field.

Findings

The findings are discussed under the categories of Status, CPD and Impact that emerged through the Content Analysis and are illustrated by drawing on pertinent data from the participants.

Status

A key finding was disagreement between members and non-members on the question of whether TAs could enhance teachers' status. Nine of the ten members felt that their membership marked them out in some way. The most common sentiment was of membership as an indicator of personal commitment to EFL, 'it shows I'm serious about all this' as Participant 8 puts it, and achievement. Often, they juxtaposed themselves with non-members to suggest a sense of superiority: 'I'm the only one in my school who is [a member]' (Participant 6). More generally, membership conferred a halo effect, which again was perceived as distinctive:

> I'm proud to have been one [a member] this long. (Participant 1)

> It's not like 'Look at me, I belong to [name of TA]', but it's definitely part of what I'm about. (Participant 3)

Furthermore, the data did not indicate that international TAs, IATEFL and TESOL International were both represented, conferred more status than the smaller localized TAs. For example, Participant 5 belonged to both IATEFL and Bangladeshi English Language Teachers' Association and credited them both equally.

The challenge posed to members' status by an often hostile EFL working environment was an omnipresent in the interviews. Factors cited, remarkably consistent given the heterogeneous nature of the sample, included a lack of autonomy, commercialism and low remuneration. Hence, it is perhaps not unsurprising that members should be anxious for status markers as a buffer against industry conditions. Three teachers specifically mentioned including

membership on their CV in the hope that this would make them more marketable. Interestingly, the only member who did not attach particular status to membership, Participant 7, worked in the UK state school system and had what she deemed a 'pretty safe job', so presumably her job security made her less anxious about a display of status.

However, this sanguine picture of enhanced status was only found in the members' data. All nine non-members rejected any connection between status and TAs, as this comment testifies:

> Another guy I work with at my work, I'm pretty sure he just joined so he could tell everybody he was a member of [name of TA] to sound more important in the staffroom. . . I think [he] somehow thinks it gives him extra status but the other teachers just kind of think, 'Yeah, so what?' (Participant 18)

The data suggest that the indifference expressed above would seem to come from two sources. First, six of the non-members knew very little about TAs and what membership actually meant. This part of the interview prompted questions such as, 'So you just pay and get a card or something?' (Participant 17) and 'It's like [name of union] then?' (Participant 13). Clearly, it would be difficult for the uninformed to identify with intangible member benefits such as status. Second, non-members related to other sources of status which were independent of TAs and closely linked to their particular circumstances, namely their institution (all four participants working in the state sector and one in a private language school), role (seven participants), qualifications (three participants mentioning they had higher degrees) and even popularity with learners (Participant 17, who actually held no teaching qualification). They projected these markers of status as self-earned. Basing status on performance, their stance is in sync with Evans' (2011) depiction of professionalism as enacted.

To summarise, in this category of status, there was somewhat of an ideological divide between members and non-members. The former felt that membership flagged their contribution to the field, a finding in line with Motteram (op. cit.).

The latter did not look to TAs for status, in part because they lacked awareness of what TAs offer, but mainly because they conceived of status as self-engineered.

CPD

Given that CPD is heavily associated with professionalism and TAs – CPD is the main function of TAs according to Lamb (op. cit.) – it is unsurprising that all ten members claimed to have benefitted from the CPD opportunities provided by both international and local TAs. Mention was made of resources, for example, Participant 8 cited ThaiTESOL journal, which he felt inspired to write for, but by far the largest volume of comments concerned conferences, especially face-to-face and international events. Comments can be summarized to signify that conferences represent the epitome of the membership experience due to the formal and informal learning opportunities which they condense into a short period. Thus Participant 7 described her first IATEFL conference, and trip abroad, as 'professionally mind-blowing'; while Participant 3 considers having a paper accepted at a TESOL International conference to be one of her major professional milestones.

What is perhaps more surprising is that all of the non-members appreciated the CPD dimension of TAs too, even if, as in most cases, they had not been able to access events, usually due to lack of funds. In fact, the little non-members knew about TAs almost entirely came from their conferences. For example, two participants were familiar with the name IATEFL through the conference (they had encountered colleagues who had attended) without realising that IATEFL was a TA, not just the name of a conference, with separate member benefits. Still, of the six non-members asked the follow-up question, 'Would you join a TA to take part in one of their events?' none answered positively, suggesting a disassociation between their CPD needs and formal identification with a professional body.

In short, regardless of their membership status, teachers recognize the CPD provision of TAs, primarily evidenced as face-to-face conferences, and its relevance to professionalism. This finding is consistent with the literature: Borg (2015) examined the impact of EFL conferences by surveying 66 attendees post-event and one theme that emerged from the content analysis was an augmented professionalism. While this represents a real achievement for TAs, there is the danger that TAs become solely identified with conferences and teachers lose sight of their wider benefits.

Impact

When considering how TAs can promote the professionalism of EFL as a field, the biggest obstacle, touched upon in the Status theme, is teachers' lack of awareness of TAs. Widely acknowledged by both members and non-members, this is a very consistent finding. For example, Participant 12, a non-member who travels extensively to train teachers in various contexts, remarks that 'I've never heard teachers even mention [TAs]'. The data confirm Blair (op. cit.) in that TAs have very little uptake amongst teachers. Worryingly for TAs, membership is actually falling (Lamb, op. cit.), so this is a real concern if Impact is considered quantitatively.

Seven non-members added that even if TAs enjoyed wider currency, they would still fail to be attractive to teachers because their benefits are intangible.

> [I]f teachers were told that you'd be on a higher pay scale if you were a member of [name of TA] and then [name of TA] said to be a member you need to do this, this, this or something, then maybe. But right now, I mean our teachers have no desire to join because they can't see how it would benefit them. (Participant 16)

The shared sentiment was that TAs cannot articulate any advantages of membership so if teachers do not have to join, they will not. Five participants, two of them members, picked up on the fact that membership is a casual arrangement, anyone can join. Several comparisons were made with professional associations in fields such as Chartered Accountancy where membership is

prized because entry is competitive. Because TAs could not similarly endorse professionalism, it was felt that TAs could not alter the status quo in EFL.

Advocacy was referenced as a mechanism to impact the field. It is conceivable that advocacy could be a vehicle for TAs to counter the claims made in the previous section that they have little practical to offer teachers. Advocacy would be relevant to professionalism if it countered industry forces seeking to impinge on personal values and beliefs. The most well-discussed example in the EFL literature of this conflict between professional and industry forces is the prejudice against NNS and the erosion of their professional identities by decreased employment opportunities: Medyges (2017: 78) reports language schools that as a business strategy only employ NS. However, although ten participants were NNS, only one comment was made as regards their disadvantage in the labour market.

> [I]t's always about native and non-native and the fact that it's difficult to find a permanent job where you can grow. (Participant 4)

When prompted, this teacher felt that the national TA he belonged to could not deal with an issue of discrimination. However, he didn't elaborate whether he felt his predicament fell outside the remit of the TA and in any case an argument cannot be built on one isolated comment.

More generally, while nine teachers commented on advocacy as a potential direction for TAs, the message was not consistent. Only four participants saw advocacy as a useful direction, and this did not depend on their membership status. For example, Participant 5 appreciated advocacy due to personal experience of becoming involved in curriculum reform in a local TA. However, as an example of the five participants who reacted negatively to advocacy, Participant 19 associated advocacy with unionisation, which she was vehemently opposed to. Speaking as a university teacher, she saw unions as only fit for 'bus drivers'. There is some snobbishness in this comment but it may tap into a fear that advocacy degenerates into militarism, which might detract from professionalism.

To sum up, the lack of penetration of TAs amongst teachers is the biggest barrier to their having an impact on the professionalism of EFL as a field. Too few teachers are informed about TAs and those that are need convincing that TAs provide anything of real value that could be applied to their current working contexts. Members and non-members alike were divided over whether TAs can or should be involved in advocacy in the field. Confusion over the role and scope of advocacy may be one reason why advocacy attracts controversy: Goodwyn (2012), giving a perspective from UK mainstream English teaching, sees a lack of advocacy as emasculating for TAs. As regards the two main international TAs represented in the data, TESOL International is active in advocacy, formulated as members' resolutions, while IATEFL is not.

Conclusions

As could be expected, the perceptions of members and non-members on the relationship between TAs and professionalism did not entirely coincide. In particular, while both members and non-members were conscious of the fragility of their status as EFL teachers, the latter did not believe that membership per se confirmed professionalism. Non-members were often too uninformed of TAs' role and values to interpret an abstract proffering such as status and in any case the evidence suggests they would be cynical of the value of membership if it did not translate into tangible benefits, for instance higher remuneration. This pragmatic reaction of non-members has not been taken into account in the member-driven studies of TAs, for example Motteram (op. cit.). However, there was uniform appreciation of the potential for CPD through TAs, confirming studies such as Borg (op. cit.) that single out conferences as of particular significance to professionalism. As Blair (op. cit.) found, teachers are largely unaware of TAs. This considerably reduces the impact of TAs on the field as a whole and possibly explains Rixon and Smith's (op. cit.) disappointment that TAs remain so marginal in the EFL literature. As for advocacy, this issue attracted comment but tended to polarize teachers based on their personal values and experiences rather than membership status. Hence, it is difficult to determine a

general stance towards expectations of TAs to engage in advocacy and impact professionalism from this angle.

Returning to Evan's (2008) definition of professionalism as perceptual and practice-based, it can be surmised that in a field as heterogeneous as EFL, teachers will interpret and enact professionalism differently under rather different circumstances. It is conceivable that some teachers' pursuit of professionalism will not include TAs, certainly joining a TA is not enough, but there is a definite role for TAs to play in professionalism as their impact on individual teachers, well-attested in the collection prefaced by Hall and Paran (op. cit.), cannot be discounted. However, in a context where membership of TAs is declining (Lamb op. cit.), TAs need to reinvent themselves in order to stay relevant to a generation of teachers who can access many of the traditional benefits of TAs, including events, for free online. It is recommended that TAs utilize the methodology in this study and take account of the views of non-members in their strategic planning. There will always be teachers who feel independent of TAs, but there are never TAs that are independent of teachers, and, lest TAs forget, non-members are just as much teachers as members.

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