

Against the Odds: Setting Up and Running an English Language Teachers Association in Pakistan

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Introduction

Professional associations are formed to play a number of roles for the enhancement of the profession and the improvement of its members' professional knowledge and skills. They serve the profession by setting up and defining standards of performance and/or licensing for its professional members. As a collective, professional associations often raise their voice in regard to matters that may impact the status of the profession as a whole and/or their individual members. Professional associations also play a role in diffusion of knowledge among members, though there may be national differences in the extent to which they can impart knowledge (Swan & Newell 1995). Additionally, specific professional associations have been recognized for their role in guiding members to produce events that have a minimum impact on environment (Dickson & Arcodia 2010), and in setting and enforcing ethical norms (Perlis & Shannon 2012; Price & Porter, 1980).

The paper starts with a brief literature review on language teacher associations. Next, Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (henceforth SPELT) is defined briefly in terms of the contextual factors

influencing its establishment in 1984, as well its governance and structure, financial resources and management, and major activities. SPELT's achievements and challenges faced over the 34 years of its existence are then shared. Finally, lessons learnt and their implications for the way forward for SPELT as well as TAs in similar settings are presented.

Language teacher associations

In the last couple of decade or so, TESOL has emerged both as a field of study and as a profession (Liu, 2012). Judd, in his presidential address in the TESOL convention, identified 10 characteristics of a profession. One of them is forming a professional association (Judd, 2006). A professional association (also called a professional organization, professional body or professional society) is normally defined as "a nonprofit organization seeking to further a particular profession, the interests of individuals engaged in that profession and the public interest" (Wikipedia-accessed 13/12/16). Harvey further defines a professional body as "a group of people in a learned occupation who are entrusted with maintaining control or oversight of the legitimate practice of the occupation" (Harvey, 2004:16).

According to Judd (2006: 2), a professional [teacher] association is formed “To serve and protect professional autonomy, a face to the public. Through collective unity we are stronger. We become visible, [It] becomes our collective voice and advocate”. Falcao & Szesztay (2006:17) elaborate the purpose of forming a teacher association further. According to them, teachers consider the setting up of a professional teacher association for improving the scholarship and practice of English language teaching and teacher education, fostering high standards, developing a community of teachers for collaborative work, mutual support and a collective identity of foreign language teachers, and offering a forum for development and exchange of products and materials.

Lamb’s definition of a language teacher association (LTA) is helpful in conceptualizing the role and functions of a teacher association. An LTA, according to Lamb is a: “network 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: 288 cited as Paran, 2016:128). Thus an LTA is a support group with the important functions of knowledge production and dissemination, and advocacy.

An LTA could function at the local/national, regional or international level. Normally, the TAs, whether they operate at the national or international level, such as SPELT, and TESOL International and IATEFL respectively, offer their members both products and services for continuing professional development such as a resource center or library, and workshops and short and long-term courses. Additionally, there is an annual conference that aims to bring together teachers and leaders in the field for mutual sharing of ideas and networking; during the year, the TA newsletter keeps the members

abreast of latest developments in the field as well as other opportunities for professional and personal growth both inside and outside the TA (Falcao & Szesztay 2006; Gomez, 2011; Khan 2010; Khanna 2010; Gnawali 2010, 2016).

SPELT: A brief introduction

SPELT was born in 1984 to improve the standard of teaching-learning of English at all levels in Pakistan. It sought to do so primarily by providing a platform for the professional development of English teachers in Pakistan through sharing of ideas and learning with and from each other. Now that SPELT has entered its 35th year, it is time to review both its achievements and the challenges faced over the 34 years of its existence.

There are a number of cultural and related issues that were considered when forming SPELT 34 years ago. First, in Pakistan, seniority and age are considered important for leadership positions rather than merit. However, it is observed that majority of these ‘seniors’ such as heads of English (literature) departments, when nominated or selected as leaders of curriculum committees, are unaware of latest development in the field of ELT. The voices of the ELT trained younger members of these committees are often not heard or are simply ignored due to respect for authority vested in the senior members. Second, professional organizations are mainly conceived of and function as labour unions to fight for teachers’ rights such as, salary increase and promotion issues, or work as a licensing body guarding the boundaries of their profession. For example, the Pakistan College Teachers Association focuses mainly on teachers’ working conditions and wage structure while the Pakistan Medical Association and Institute of Engineers are professional bodies that function mainly as regulatory agencies. Professional organizations also sometimes serve as a means

of gaining political and social stature. Third, lack of professional work ethics is observed in the field of education in the public sector in particular, for example, teacher absences, coming late to class, or attending government organized professional development workshops to get travel and daily allowance only (British Council, 1986; Husain & Sarwar, 1989; Siddiqui, 2007).

Against these odds, the Society of English Language Teachers was established by a group of English language teachers in 1984. The founding members agreed to address their own and their colleagues' professional development needs by providing a platform for mutual exchange of ideas about ELT curriculum, materials, and pedagogy in varied contexts in Pakistan. This was the first subject-specific teacher association to be established in Pakistan, and among the first few ELT associations in the region¹. As such, no local or regional TA models were available for the founding members to learn from. Hence, the founder members' shared understanding of the specific educational, cultural and social factors in Pakistan provided the basis for shaping the structure and activities of SPELT at the point of inception. Due to the dearth of ELT research in Pakistan, these shared understandings and experiences of SPELT members have served as a major guiding force in its development in subsequent years also.

The mission and goals of SPELT, as recorded in the SPELT charter (1987:1), are as follows: *SPELT's goals are to provide a professional forum for its members and practitioners teaching English as a Foreign/Second language, to facilitate effective communication and to improve the teaching/learning standards of English in Pakistan.*

The charter elaborates that in order to meet these goals, SPELT will do the following:

- * Organize academic sessions, professional development programmes, and teacher-research facilities.
- * Network with sister organizations worldwide to disseminate, share ideas and methodologies appropriate for the local situation.
- * Aim to produce high quality, contextually suitable materials to support the professional development of its members.
- * Make an effort to collaborate with government agencies to develop ELT materials for the public sector.
- * Actively support environmental, peace and human rights issues through its published materials and workshops. (SPELT Charter, 1987: p.1)

Structure and Governance

The structure and governance of SPELT was shaped by the context in which it was formed. SPELT was established as a voluntary non-government, non-profit organization with a non-hierarchical structure of seven elected coordinators, each with a well-defined portfolio and a sub-committee to help them perform their stipulated role and functions within the organization (see SPELT charter, 1987). Currently, SPELT has a head office and field office in Karachi, the latter at a founding members' residence, to provide logistic support to its leadership to enable them to serve the SPELT membership more effectively across Pakistan.

SPELT decided to have a non-hierarchical structure to be more inclusive and to ensure that 'seniority' is not necessarily a qualification for heading an organization. We hoped that this kind of structure would allow all teachers-junior or senior, young or old- an equal voice in making decisions about their own and their colleagues' professional development as well as the development of the ELT profession in Pakistan more generally. Also, the term

‘Coordinator’ was chosen for office bearers as we felt it has less of a ‘halo’ around it compared to the terms ‘President’, ‘Vice President’ etc., which seem to have a greater ‘status’ attached to them and may encourage some people to act more authoritatively than required in a fledgling language teachers’ association in Pakistan. Having a flat structure in SPELT also helped identify SPELT as *different* from the teacher associations already working in Pakistan.

Moreover, to gain credibility as a *professional* teacher association, SPELT focused, particularly in its initial years, on developing and role-modeling a professional work culture with special focus on punctuality and non-cancellation of events. It tried to convey the message that SPELT events, unlike similar events organized by the government or donor agencies in particular, were held for professional purposes only and not for *khana peena* [to get travel allowance or a good meal]. Accordingly, only tea and home-made sandwiches (donated by a SPELT founding member) were served in the first SPELT conference held in 1985 to beat the culture of lavish lunches and dinners normally offered at educational seminars and conferences. Also, the conference was held at an educational institution instead of the usual venues such as five-star hotels for such events. Additionally, to gain credibility locally, and recognition at the more global level, SPELT became in 1989, five years after it came into being, an affiliate of two major international teacher associations, TESOL, USA and IATEFL, UK. SPELT is still an affiliate of these associations and has enabled many of its members to join IATEFL at very nominal rates under IATEFL’s Wider Global Membership scheme and benefit from their programs.

Resources and Funding

SPELT’s major sources of funding include:

membership fee, fee from annual conference, workshops, teacher education certificate courses, consultancy, and advertisements for SPELT journal and conference program book. When SPELT was started the founding members deliberated on how to build a reputation for ‘honesty’ in financial matters in a society where corruption was rampant and teacher organizations were used to get political and financial gains. It was agreed that SPELT will not engage in any fund-raising till it builds its credibility as a *professional* association. Hence, for the first year after SPELT was established, founding members used their own resources for typing and mailing of letters, and paying for basic office expenditure such as, stationary and photo copying. Then a year later, a nominal membership fee was started as part of its policy of **bottom-up resource development**. Donor support was accepted only in kind such as, venue for workshops/conference, books and to support the travel of resource persons. As SPELT started with no financial resources, the house of one of the founding members was used as its office for a number of years; it still serves as the association’s ‘field’ office for holding after work-hours meetings etc.

One of the issues identified by a consultancy report about SPELT is that has *limited funds* and *limited capacity for raising funds* (Ali 2012). However, not seeking funds directly from any donor agency (except for buying an office space) has allowed SPELT to chart its own course of development with a total focus on members’ needs instead of any personal or political exigencies. However, SPELT has built, over the years, a number of professional partnerships with publishers such as the Oxford University Press, and organizations such as the British Council and United States Agency for Development in Pakistan. In addition, SPELT network includes other TAs in the region and internationally.

To maintain transparency in accounts, there

is an annual audit of SPELT accounts by a reputable firm of Chartered Accountants in Pakistan. The audited financial report is shared with the general membership in its annual general body meeting and is available in SPELT records for future reference.

Activities

SPELT conducts the following four activities on a regular basis:

Monthly Academic sessions:

These are held on the last Saturday each month and have been a regular feature of SPELT since its inception 34 years ago. These sessions allow the participants a platform or shared space to share and discuss their classroom level issues and success stories. These also become training ground for SPELTers to gain the required skills and confidence to present at conferences and become workshop leaders.

SPELT Annual conference

The SPELT conferences are being held since 1985. Initially they were held in Karachi only as that is where the founding members were based and could use their contacts to get a free venue, for example, for the conference. However, soon it was felt that teachers from other parts of Pakistan were unable to benefit from the conference. This realization led to the idea of a ‘travelling’ conference; it was decided that the resource persons would be facilitated to travel to different cities and present at ‘mini-conferences’ to be hosted by the local SPELT chapters. Now every year, the conference starts on a week end in Karachi with more than a thousand teachers attending, and then moves to other cities the next week end to enable the local chapter members to benefit from listening to and interacting with resource persons travelling from different parts of the world including USA, UK, and

Australia along with the local presenters (For details, see Sarwar 2011, 2016). Home hospitality is offered to out-station resource persons to cut the cost of staying in hotels. Interestingly, it has been found that this home-stay has additional benefits; for example, it allows the opportunity to forge networks and build personal and professional friendships that last much beyond the conference. The resource persons from other countries also appreciate the opportunity to mingle with the friends of families of their hosts and learn about the local culture (Aronson, 2014; Blok, 2015; Ruas, 2017).

SPELT journal

The ‘SPELT Quarterly’ is a hybrid between a teacher and a research journal. The first long article is research-based while the rest of the journal contains teaching ideas and allows space for teachers (who may not be well versed in academic writing) to share their classroom experiences and materials, particularly those that are locally produced and contextually appropriate for the specific teaching-learning settings in Pakistan. The SPELT journal, distributed free to members, is the only teachers’ journal in Pakistan. Discussions have taken place among SPELT members about whether the journal should be changed into a research journal to get recognition and also funding from the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan. However, as for other SPELT activities, teachers’ needs prevail here over any material benefit. Hence, despite resource constraints, the SPELT journal continues to serve English language teachers in Pakistan. Currently, discussions are underway for publishing the SPELT journal online also to increase its reach to members across Pakistan, but many teachers still do not have access to technology and internet. Hence, SPELT may need to continue with the print version also which may be very demanding in terms of resource provision.

Workshops and courses: Opportunities and pathways for continuous teacher development

SPELT regularly offers workshops and short courses (6-10 hours) for English language teachers. Additionally, two one year long teacher education certificate programs are offered annually. These are: SPELT Practical Teacher Training Course (PTTC), and International Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT), conducted in affiliation with the Cambridge University, UK.

The PTTC started in 1989 and certified by SPELT, instantly became popular. However, participants' feedback suggested the need for government recognition of the course, to add to their 'qualifications portfolio' and possible salary enhancement. Accordingly, affiliation was sought from Cambridge University for their Royal Society of Arts Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE); this was granted in 1989; this program developed later into the International Certificate for English Language Teachers (ICELT) course. It was realized that many teachers wanting to do the COTE program may not fulfill the basic eligibility criteria for admission. Also, SPELT did not have the resources to run two courses at the same time, i.e. PTTC and ICELT, so a 'two pronged' approach was developed. SPELT enrolled participants for the two courses, COTE and PTTC, for "inputs sessions" together with the same tutors; however their class observations and classroom-based assignments were different, the latter following the Cambridge University requirements for certification. Also, the PTTC participants were accepted with lower proficiency levels in English compared to the COTE/ICELT trainees to help the professional development of teachers with relatively low proficiency in English. The point to note is that by using this flexible approach of a two pronged course, SPELT endeavored to fulfill the needs of its membership, which

included teachers from different economic backgrounds and varied proficiency levels in English. For this it used an innovative approach to deliver quality teaching to the participants of both PTTC and COTE while maintaining, at the same time, the Cambridge University standards for certification.

Additionally, SPELT offers consultancy services for developing curricula and learning materials as well as school-based teacher training and development and for improving the proficiency level of English teachers. However, it is noteworthy that SPELT members are willing to provide their expertise on needs-basis at very nominal rates or even on voluntary basis, for example, for writing textbooks for the public sector schools, due to their commitment to SPELT's mission and goal of helping improve the standards of teaching-learning of English in Pakistan.

Successes and challenges: A critical look

SPELT has succeeded in continuing with its regular activities such as the monthly academic session and the training workshops and courses despite many challenges. Also, it has successfully held its annual international conference starting from the conference city and travelling to at least 3 other cities along with mini-conferences in 1-2 units each year since 1993. SPELT owes its achievements to the commitment of its volunteers and leadership. The SPELT working committee members are all busy professionals, parents and even social activists with a range of responsibilities both at home and their work place. However, due to their commitment to improving ELT in Pakistan, they find time and resources to plan and conduct professional development programs for English language teachers in Pakistan.

More specifically, SPELT leadership are often asked how they can meet the emerging and long-term professional development needs of

their members. Also, how has SPELT been able to work without any external funding sources? More important, how has How has SPELT been able to develop and maintain the spirit of volunteerism? As these questions are so interrelated, we will, in this section aim to answer them through an overall critical analysis of SPELT's approach and strategies used over a period of more than 3 decades now.

As mentioned earlier, SPELT has many achievements to its credit; however, but its journey has also been fraught with a number of challenges. This section will highlight the strategies that have been instrumental in SPELT's success. The next section will discuss major challenges faced by SPELT over the years, but particularly during the few years in the light of the changes in the ELT world both locally and globally, as it tries to meet the changing/emerging needs of teachers for professional development in Pakistan. Strategies for success

Contextually responsive practices

All SPELT activities, as described above, have developed in response to local contextual factors as well as the professional development needs of English language teachers in Pakistan. For example, teachers' frustration with outdated syllabi and testing methods led to the focus in SPELT's first two conferences on evaluation of English language syllabi and testing practices in Pakistan. Similarly, SPELT programs and courses focused on contextually relevant issues such as teaching with limited resources, large classes, and adapting the textbook and teaching material for applying a learner-centered pedagogy in the classroom.

Teachers' problems such as lack of funds and issues in travelling long distances to conferences, particularly for women teachers, became the trigger for developing the SPELT

travelling conference. SPELT's travelling conference model has now been adopted by some TAs in the region facing similar resource and contextual constraints. Due to low teacher salaries and lack of financial support from their institutions, in general, the membership, workshop and conference fee is kept very low to make it affordable for all teachers. Fees for the formal one-year teacher education programs can also be paid in installments.

Developing a culture of professional work ethics and learning with and from each other

Efforts were made to develop a professional culture. This included starting and ending SPELT programs on time. It was felt that English language teachers in Pakistan needed to get out of the 'foreign experts syndrome' (Beaumont 1997:72) by having opportunities to explore their own potential thereby taking charge of their professional development². Hence, a culture of learning with and from each other was promoted through the monthly academic session where all teachers were invited to share their teaching ideas -anything that worked for them in their classroom, with other teachers for their mutual benefit. As the sessions were conducted to address teachers' needs, the teachers come to a SPELT session or conference not for lavish teas and lunches, as is customary in conferences and seminars in Pakistan, but for their professional development.

Building a culture of caring and sharing: The SPELT family

In keeping with the cultural tradition of its members, SPELT has developed a culture of 'caring and 'sharing' among its members. While maintaining professional standards of performance set for itself, SPELT also promotes a humanist approach. Majority of SPELT members are women. Often teachers report a lack of support from their employers

for pursuing professional development. Similarly they face resentment from friends and family for attending SPELT meetings and events in their own time. In addition SPELTers, like other women in Pakistan, cannot shirk their responsibilities for attending family weddings/other functions that may continue for days. During this time, it has been observed that SPELT trainees in particular fall behind in their assigned work or are unable to attend scheduled sessions. Often this leads to a lot of frustration on their part and sometimes even the decision to drop out of the program. At such junctures, the tutors often feel empathy with the participants and extend submission deadlines or provide other forms of emotional support as is customary for family members to do in times of need. This has helped many teachers complete their programs of study with SPELT. Many of them offer their services as volunteers later. Similarly, for the leadership, volunteer leaders can take ‘time-off’ to attend to family or job matters, with other members willingly stepping in to manage their work during this time. As a result, instead of feeling stressed and resigning from their positions, they return after their temporary absence for their volunteer work in SPELT when ready to do so.

Thus SPELT provides a social space, akin to a support group, for its members to meet like-minded people and even to share and discuss their mutual domestic issues as they improve their self-esteem and gain confidence to act more professionally in their work and commitments. This has helped in keeping up members’ spirit of volunteerism over the years (see also Shamim & Sarwar, in press).

Thinking out of the box: Innovative strategies

SPELT is a non-profit organization. As it has no external source of funding it often has to work on a shoe-string budget, while

maintaining the quality of its programs. Thus SPELT has used innovative strategies for stretching its limited funds. For example, it tries to manage its programs and events in economical ways by using educational institutions as conference venue instead of five-star hotels or other expensive places. Another example is SPELT’s practice for several years to run the first part of its two one-year courses i.e. PTTC and COTE/ICELT together, as with few participants for each course, it was not financially viable to run them separately. This helped maximize given resources while maintaining quality of these courses at the same time.

As mentioned earlier, in the SPELT annual travelling conference home hospitality is provided by local SPELTers for outstation conference speakers. Also, for several years, the SPELT Head office ran from the house of a founding member.

According to the SPELT charter, SPELT is also a non-hierarchical organization. As mentioned earlier, this strategy of having a non-hierarchical structure and governance was adopted for building credibility as a professional organization in the context of distrust of existing teacher organizations in Pakistan.

Strategies for knowledge building and recognition locally and regionally/globally

SPELT became an affiliate of TESOL and IATEFL soon after inception. It has also networked with other teacher organizations in the region, sharing ideas and inviting their members as speakers for its conferences. SPELT leaders have also participated in a British Council project for strengthening the TAs in the region. This has provided an invaluable opportunity to SPELT for mutual exchange of ideas and experiences for promoting collaborative learning with and from other colleagues.

Focus on traditions rather than formal policies

In Pakistan, it is observed that family traditions are more binding on members than any written word (Shamim & Qureshi, 2010). As an extended family, SPELT has had almost no formal ‘policy manual’ since its charter was approved in 1988 for its formal registration under the Societies Act in Pakistan. However, during this time, it has set up many traditions such as that of punctuality for its meetings, programs and other professional work. The total commitment of SPELT members to its mission and goals has helped them uphold these traditions in the absence of any explicit procedures for accountability and performance evaluation of its leadership, in particular. However, as will be discussed in the next section, this along with some other practices that initially led to SPELT’s success are now becoming in these changing times, challenges for SPELT in maintaining its image and credibility as a professional association of English language teachers in Pakistan.

National, Regional and International networking

At the national level, SPELT has supported the setting up on other teacher associations such as the Maths Teacher Association (MAP) and an Urdu language teachers’ association “Pakistani Tanzeem-e-Asataza Baraye-Tadrees-e- Urdu” (PATA BATA). At the regional level, SPELT was part of the British Council project, ‘Strengthening language Teacher Associations in South Asia’ (SPELT, 2008). In 2017, SPELT successfully hosted a LTAs meeting at the time of its annual conference. The meeting was attended by six TAs i.e. BELTA (Bangladesh English Language Teachers Association), NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers Association), TESOL Africa, TESOL Arabia, TESOL Sudan, and TESOL Greece. At the international level, as mentioned earlier,

SPELT has been an affiliate of TESOL, USA and IATEFL, UK since 1989.

As will be discussed in the next section, ironically, some of the strategies such as having a non-hierarchical culture and following traditions rather than fixed policies and procedures, now seem to be problematic for SPELT’s future development. There is growing realization among the SPELT leadership that these challenges need to be dealt with on an urgent basis if SPELT is to continue serving its members as a national organization in Pakistan.

Issues and challenges

This section will briefly discuss the challenges being faced by SPELT, within the changing ELT context, both in Pakistan and at the global level, and some of the measures being taken by SPELT to address them. Interestingly while the challenges are local, they seem to have a global resonance.

Four major challenges were identified by Baber et al. (2005) for networks. These are: sustainability, genuine collaboration, leadership, and quality of networking. More specifically, the challenges faced by SPELT in 2005, 20 years after it was established, were identified by Sarwar, one of the founding members, as: difficulty in maintaining its non-hierarchical structure, involving the general membership in SPELT’s day to day working and inculcating a spirit of ownership, generating financial resources to run quality professional development programs/events for teachers at a low cost, and developing and sustaining the spirit of ‘volunteerism’ (Baber et al., 2005: 236-7). During the last decade or so these challenges have intensified and could prove to be major hurdles for SPELT in maintaining its track record of achievements as a professional association of language teachers in Pakistan. At the same time the ‘difficult circumstances’ continue both

cultural and financial (cf. Kuchaah & Shamim, 2018). Interestingly many other LTAs also seem to be facing similar challenges. According to Falcao and Szesztay (2006: 13), many teacher associations (TAs) are at a cross road also: “It is increasingly harder for TAs to find (active) members. It is increasingly harder to find people who are ready to do voluntary work for TAs”. Some other challenges noted by them are: “a new social reality: an accelerating pace of life, increased professionalization, as well as growing commercialization of ELT” (p.18).

Changing ELT scene in Pakistan

During the last decade or so, several courses and programs have started for English language teachers in Pakistan. Many universities that traditionally offered Bachelors and Masters level programs in Literature only are offering them now in Applied Linguistics and ELT also. Additionally, the Aga Khan University’s Institute for Educational Development offers specific certificate and diploma level programs for English teachers. Furthermore, several professional development opportunities are being offered by some private school systems and universities for their own teachers but also as part of their outreach activities to underprivileged or low income schools. At the same time, many avenues are now available for online learning including free webinars offered by organisations such as the British Council.

With the recent growth of ELT in higher education institutions in Pakistan (Shamim, 2011), English language teachers are in high demand, particularly as part-time faculty in HE institutions. This situation seems to be akin to that of ESOL teachers in the US (Liu 2012).

SPELT Quarterly is a teachers’ journal with

a focus on ideas and materials for classroom. Though it is the only journal of its kind in Pakistan for English Language Teachers (or any teachers for that matter), it is not recognized by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan that only gives recognition to research journals. Hence, teachers from higher education institutions do not get any recognition for publishing in the SPELT journal while publishing is not a requirement for school teachers. Thus it’s often a challenge to get quality material for the journal on a regular basis.

Structure and Governance

The non-hierarchical structure of SPELT has led to the leadership or coordinators achieving excellence in their domains (conference, workshops etc.), which has led to improved professionalism in these areas of SPELT’s work. However, as there is no ‘central’ national-level leadership or coordinating committee, the issue of relative rights and responsibilities of Head office and chapters has escalated in recent years.

As there are explicit policy guidelines for new members and particularly the leadership of SPELT chapters, there is lack of clarity in regard to job responsibilities. Furthermore, there are no accountability procedures for ‘non-compliance’ of the basic tenets of the SPELT charter by chapters and units, which often leads to a resentment when agreed jobs and assignments are either not completed or submitted on time.

While SPELT has extended the nature and range of its activities over the years, it still works with low-paid staff of 3 members due to financial constraints. Hence, the Head office is unable to provide the required level of support to the leadership in implementing SPELT plans and programs. This increases the burden on the volunteers and some of them

leave in exasperation when they find that they have to spend time (and resources) in doing small odd jobs which could be handled by the office with better staffing.

To sum up, on one hand is the changing local and global ELT environment with new/ changing nature of teachers' needs for professional development. On the other, with more avenues open for teachers' professional development, both face-to-face and online, it is important to consider ways of maintaining members' interests in SPELT activities. Thus SPELT needs to review its programmatic activities and overall member benefits to offer members incentives within the cutting edge changing market trends and teachers emerging needs for continuing professional development. On the other, succession planning and finding volunteer members in these changing times is the need of the hour. As an LTA, SPELT needs to be dynamic but also remain sensitive to the local culture and context. This is a difficult balance indeed- akin to walking on the proverbial tight rope!

To deal with some of these challenges, SPELT is undertaking the following measures:

1. Review of SPELT programs re changing ELT scene
2. Review of member benefits
3. Defining and strengthening the chapter and head office relationships
4. Developing and publishing clear guidelines for governance, new initiatives, budget approval etc. (a policy and procedures manual)
5. Succession planning and capacity building of its leadership
6. Increasing SPELT's online presence: website, online journal, other social media
7. Strengthening the head office with more qualified paid and volunteer staff

Today, looking back at SPELT's achievements during the 34 years of its

existence and work for empowering English language teachers in Pakistan, we feel humbled. However, many of the 'difficult circumstances' remain to be tackled such as limited funds. At the same time, the changing ELT scene in Pakistan and at the global level has underlined the need for re-envisioning the mission and goals, and structure of SPELT. For this purpose, recently two task forces were formed: first, to look at the restructuring of SPELT overall; and second, to review and make recommendations for improving SPELT's image and activities as a national organization with a particular focus on SPELT chapters' roles and responsibilities. The recommendation of these task forces are expected to lead to the development of a policy and procedures manual soon. A certificate program for leadership development was also piloted in 2017 with the working committee members. It is hoped that this will become in the coming years the avenue for the ongoing development of both first and second tier leadership in SPELT.

Lessons learnt and the way forward

LTAs need to be context-sensitive in their structure and organization. But at the same time they need to be dynamic and ready to change according to changes in the profession both at the local and global level. Following lessons are learnt from our work with SPELT and other regional and international TAs over the years.

Think global, act local: TAs need to engage in knowledge sharing and knowledge building with the wider academic community. However, at the same time they need to encourage the development of contextually appropriate pedagogy and materials for English language teaching and provide their members with avenues for collaborative learning with and from each other.

Engage in ongoing review and strategic

planning: The tension between the local teacher realities and their emerging needs within the context of global developments in the field requires ongoing strategic planning and resource management (both human and financial) for maintaining the quality of the TAs products and services and to sustain their members' interest.

Review and spread out member benefits: TAs also need to think of ways of increasing and spreading out member benefits to teachers in the remote or far-flung areas where the teachers need this kind of professional development support the most.

Develop a professional and a humanistic approach: TAs are mainly dependent for their success on the work of their volunteer members (they are different from funded projects and commercial organizations). Hence, the policies and procedures should be sensitive to the local issues faced by teachers and provide ways to facilitate their volunteer work in the organization such as some logistic support through qualified paid staff.

Think out of the box! Finally, the most important lesson learnt is that TAs need to develop innovative strategies and practices with sensitivity to the local context and their members' needs to develop and sustain their interest and more important, their spirit of volunteerism.

Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings' in their article "Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields" (2002) address the role of associations 'at moments of deinstitutionalization and change' (p. 59). At such times, it is argued that professional associations can play a key role by first 'hosting a process of discourse' (p.59) to debate and discuss 'theorizing' about change, and subsequently through engaging in

legitimizing and endorsing local innovations and their diffusion. This process can help in reconstituting professional identities. This neatly summarizes the way forward for SPELT and similar teacher organizations elsewhere.

(Footnotes)

¹ Both authors are founding members of SPELT. Fauzia Shamim currently serves on SPELT's program sub-committee while Zakia Sarwar is the Honorary Executive Director of SPELT. The authors can be contacted at: fauzia.shamim@yahoo.com; sarwar.zakia@gmail.com

¹ In the mid 80s, when SPELT was born, only workshops delivered by 'foreign experts' were valued, but they often were unaware of the challenges faced by teachers in Pakistan.

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ⁱ In the 1990s several subject specific associations were formed with funding and logistic support for the Institute of Educational Development of the Aga Khan University, Karachi. Similarly, following SPELT, other TAs were established in the region mainly with support from the British Council such as, NELTA in Nepal, BELTA in Bangladesh, SLELTA in Sri Lanka and ELTAA in Afghanistan (for details, see their websites). ELTAI in India was formed in 1974 but the founder members became aware of its existence much later.