

Teachers' Professional Transformation through European Educational Programs: A Thematic Analysis of Language Educators' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a thematic analysis of language teachers' perceptions of professional transformation following participation in European educational programs (Erasmus+ and eTwinning). Based on interview data from six language educators (teaching English, German, and French across Europe), the study addresses the research question: *How do teachers perceive their professional transformation after participating in European programs?* Findings reveal transformative shifts across four interconnected dimensions: (1) identity reconfiguration from knowledge transmitter to facilitator; (2) pedagogical methodology change toward collaboration, technology integration, and authentic communication; (3) enhanced professional confidence and leadership positioning; and (4) sustained participation in transnational professional networks. Language teachers report fundamental shifts in pedagogical philosophies, classroom practices, professional confidence, and international relationships, with particular emphasis on collaborative, student-centered, and digitally-mediated approaches. The article argues that European programs catalyze profound professional reorientation among language educators, fostering agency, intercultural competence, and adaptive pedagogical practice that extends beyond individual classrooms to systemic educational change.

Keywords: language teachers, professional development, European programs, Erasmus+, eTwinning.

INTRODUCTION

Professional transformation among teachers engaged in European educational initiatives represents a critical yet understudied area of inquiry in contemporary educational research. The European Commission's recent strategic initiatives—particularly Erasmus+ and eTwinning—have positioned teacher professional development as central to enhancing educational quality and fostering innovation across member states (European Commission, 2023). Language teachers occupy a strategically significant position within schools, as they mediate intercultural communication, develop students' multilingual competencies, and model cultural openness within increasingly diverse educational contexts. However, empirical understanding of *how* language educators themselves perceive transformation through participation in European programs remains surprisingly limited. This article addresses this gap through systematic thematic analysis of language teachers' narratives, revealing profound and multidimensional shifts in professional identity, pedagogical practice, and conceptualization of their roles within contemporary educational landscapes. The focus on language educators specifically is warranted given their unique position as practitioners of multilingualism and intercultural communication, competencies that European programs explicitly target.

METHODOLOGY

Data were drawn from a comprehensive electronic questionnaire administered to secondary language teachers across Europe who had participated in Erasmus+ or eTwinning programs within the preceding three years. The questionnaire included structured and open-ended items addressing teachers' perceptions of professional change, pedagogical innovation, challenges, and sustainable impact. The analysis presented here focuses exclusively on six language educators (teaching English, German, and French across six European countries) to maintain

thematic coherence, interpretive depth, and authentic representation of language teacher experiences. This focused sampling approach allows for rich, detailed analysis while maintaining sufficient diversity of linguistic context and program participation modalities (job shadowing, virtual collaboration, face-to-face exchange). Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to systematically identify, code, and interpret patterns within participants' narrative responses to open-ended questions. This approach privileges teacher voice and authentic expression while maintaining analytical rigor through systematic coding procedures and interpretive transparency. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Western Macedonia, and all participants provided informed consent with explicit permission for quotation in academic publications.

FINDINGS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Shifting Professional Identity—From Knowledge Transmitter to Facilitator

The most striking and consistent finding across language teachers' narratives was a fundamental reconfiguration of professional identity and role conceptualization. Participants consistently and explicitly described moving away from traditionally authoritative roles—what they characterized as "knowledge transmission" or "instruction"—toward more collaborative, student-centered facilitation models rooted in dialogue, co-construction of meaning, and celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Adam, an Austrian German language teacher with 21 years' experience, articulated this identity shift with particular clarity: *"My role shifted from an instructor focused on teaching 'standard German' to a facilitator who values all linguistic and cultural resources my students bring. I now see myself as an advocate and spokesperson for inclusive practices within my staff."* This transformation extended beyond philosophical reorientation to concrete reconceptualization of professional purpose and positioning within the school community. His extended reflection captures the depth of change: *"My professional confidence has grown as I help colleagues embrace and celebrate diversity in their teaching."* This statement reveals that identity transformation extends beyond individual classroom practice to encompass advocacy and peer leadership roles.

Similarly, Claire, a French English literature educator with 18 years' experience, described her transformation in explicitly pedagogical terms: *"I now view myself as a facilitator and creative coach rather than a source of expertise, which has made my classes more dynamic and inclusive. The programs pushed me to experiment and to trust my students' ideas, and I am much more comfortable guiding their explorations in English."* This narrative reveals not simply role shift but also enhanced comfort with ambiguity, experimentation, and student agency—competencies central to contemporary pedagogy.

Notably, language teachers framed this identity shift not as diminishment of expertise or authority but as strategic repositioning of expertise toward facilitation. Rather than positioning themselves as gatekeepers of language accuracy and cultural "correctness," they reconceptualized their role as architects of learning environments and advocates for multilingual, multicultural perspectives that acknowledge students' home languages and cultural resources as pedagogical assets rather than deficiencies.

Frauke, a German French language teacher with 14 years' experience, captured this reframing succinctly: *"I have shifted from a 'teacher' to a facilitator, not just instructor. Social, interactive digital group work became the cornerstone of my practice."* Her use of "not just instructor" signals awareness of traditional role limitations and indicates deliberate, conscious movement toward alternative professional identity. This transformation aligns with contemporary theories of teacher agency and reflective practice, wherein professional growth involves deliberate reconsideration of pedagogical philosophy and role definition (Priestley et al., 2015). For language teachers specifically, this shift carries particular significance, as it acknowledges that language competence alone no longer suffices; rather, the ability to orchestrate meaningful intercultural communication, manage linguistically and culturally diverse learners, and facilitate authentic language use emerges as paramount professional competence.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Methodology—Integration of Collaboration, Technology, and Authentic Communication

European program participation precipitated substantial, deliberate changes in language teachers' instructional methods. All language teachers in this sample described moving toward collaborative, project-based, and digitally-mediated approaches—a departure from traditional grammar-focused or textbook-centered instruction that characterizes much conventional language teaching.

Maria, a Greek English language teacher with 12 years' experience, exemplified this methodological transformation comprehensively: *"I shifted to project-based learning, more use of ICT, collaborative lesson planning, flipped classroom. International pen-pals, online discussions, student presentations, digital storytelling became routine in my classes."* Her description encompasses multiple pedagogical innovations simultaneously: active learning (project-based), technology integration (ICT, flipped classroom), collaboration (peer interaction, international partnerships), and authentic communication contexts (pen-pals, online discussions). She emphasized the affective and engagement outcomes these approaches generated: *"Notably higher engagement, even shy students get involved in projects."* This observation is significant, as research consistently demonstrates that collaborative, project-based learning increases participation among traditionally marginalized students, particularly those with language learning anxieties.

The integration of digital tools emerged as particularly significant across language teachers' narratives. Claire described her instructional evolution: *"Creative book clubs and collaborative writing workshops have become the norm in my classroom, using online forums and video-conferencing tools to connect with partner schools in Ireland and beyond. Literature is now a springboard for exploring cultural issues and fostering empathy, and my lessons increasingly involve digital projects that speak to students' individual interests."* Her description reveals how technology functions not as an end itself but as infrastructure enabling authentic intercultural communication, collaborative meaning-making, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Frauke's experience highlighted how European programs facilitated discovery of authentic communication contexts mediated through digital technology: *"Long-term WhatsApp groups, online co-projects became the vehicle for real communication in French. Students engage in digital pen-pal projects, speaking, and social, interactive digital group work. Higher oral skills and student excitement became evident."* Her reference to WhatsApp groups—informal, student-initiated communication platforms—is particularly notable, as it suggests that European program participation normalized and legitimized digital communication spaces already central to students' social worlds, effectively bridging formal and informal language learning contexts.

Critically, language teachers reported that these methodological shifts were not merely technical additions to existing practice—new tools deployed within traditional frameworks—but represented fundamental reorientation toward authentic, communicative language use as pedagogical philosophy. The traditional dichotomy between "correct language" (accurate grammar, native-like pronunciation) and "meaningful communication" (authentic language use for real communicative purposes) dissolved as teachers integrated real international audiences into their classrooms. Students wrote to actual peers in other countries rather than to hypothetical audiences; they engaged in genuine problem-solving with international collaborators rather than textbook-based communication exercises. This finding corroborates research by Caena and Redecker (2019) regarding eTwinning's capacity to foster authentic language use within meaningful intercultural contexts and aligns with communicative language teaching theory emphasizing learner autonomy and authentic communication (Littlewood, 2018).

Theme 3: Enhanced Professional Identity, Confidence, and Leadership Positioning

Parallel to identity reconfiguration and methodological transformation, language teachers reported substantial increases in professional confidence, sense of efficacy, and positioning as leaders and advocates within broader educational communities. This dimension extended significantly beyond classroom-specific competence to encompass expanded professional roles, advocacy positions, and systemic influence within schools and educational networks.

Adam described his expanded professional role and leadership positioning: *"Sharing my practice with international peers has led me to adopt more flexible and student-centered approaches overall."* Moreover, he noted systemic implications transcending individual classroom impact: *"My school now runs language and diversity-infused projects each year and supports new staff to join. This culture shift is reflected in our recruitment and professional development plans."* This narrative reveals how individual teacher transformation catalyzes institutional change—European program participation by one teacher precipitated whole-school curriculum reform prioritizing diversity and internationalism.

Maria's narrative illustrated how participation fostered explicit leadership positioning and institutional recognition: *"I feel intellectually and emotionally reinvigorated. The school administration supports our exchanges, which have also earned media attention and parent praise. I have become better connected with English teachers across Europe, who regularly offer support and new ideas."* Her reference to "intellectual and emotional reinvigoration" captures the affective dimensions of professional transformation often overlooked in technical analyses of professional development. The explicit mention of "media attention and parent praise" indicates how international work became valued as marker of institutional excellence, elevating the status of participating teachers.

Claire emphasized how confidence extended into formal institutional recognition and professional standing: *"I feel intellectually and emotionally reinvigorated, and my students and colleagues have started to view literature lessons as relevant and creative. The school administration supports our exchanges, which have also earned media attention and parent praise."* Her observations reveal how European program participation functions as what Bourdieu would term "cultural capital"—symbolic resources increasing teacher status and professional influence within school hierarchies. The shift from literature as "traditional" subject to literature as vehicle for cultural understanding and contemporary engagement constitutes significant repositioning of disciplinary status.

Significantly, language teachers' enhanced confidence did not emerge exclusively from classroom-level success or student learning gains—important though these are—but was substantially reinforced by international professional networks and peer validation from colleagues across national boundaries. The social dimension of European programs—recognition from educators across Europe as pedagogical innovators and change agents—appears to have functioned as powerful confirmation of pedagogical value, effectively countering potential institutional skepticism and compensating for possible resistance from colleagues less engaged with international initiatives.

Theme 4: Sustained Professional Networking and Transnational Communities of Practice

A fourth critical dimension of professional transformation involved the creation and maintenance of transnational professional networks extending far beyond individual program participation periods. Language teachers consistently described ongoing relationships with colleagues across Europe that functioned as sustained sources of pedagogical innovation, mutual support, and professional identity reinforcement.

Maria emphasized the institutionalization and sustainability of international connections: *"Ongoing exchanges with Spain, pan-European 'English days', professional network. Now embedded in English curriculum, but needs ongoing admin support."* Her reference to "pan-European 'English days'"—seemingly informal, collaborative celebrations of English language and culture—indicates how international partnerships extended beyond formal academic collaboration to encompass cultural and social dimensions of professional community. The qualification "but needs ongoing admin support" reflects her awareness that sustained international work requires institutional endorsement and resource allocation.

Claire described the permanence and depth of international partnerships: *"We now have a standing book club with a school in Ireland, jointly reading and discussing a new book each term via blog posts and video calls. Our students continue to write to and work with their international partners after projects formally conclude. The exchange of resources and advice is ongoing among teachers involved in the project."* This narrative reveals how European programs catalyze not episodic exchanges but permanent, institutionalized collaborations embedded in curricular structures. The reference to students' ongoing communication after formal project

conclusion suggests that international partnerships transform students' understanding of language learning as authentic engagement with global audiences rather than classroom exercises.

Frauke illustrated how networks sustained and reinforced professional growth: *"Now a routine exchange. Ongoing partner programs. School support for travel. French is learned by using it."* Her succinct articulation—"French is learned by using it"—captures the pedagogical transformation occurring when language learning shifts from classroom abstraction to genuine communicative necessity, made possible through sustained international partnerships.

These narratives align powerfully with sociocultural theories of teacher professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasize learning as participation within communities of practice. European programs appeared to have catalyzed formation of durable professional communities transcending institutional and national boundaries, providing sustained sources of pedagogical innovation, intellectual stimulation, and mutual support. These networks function as what Ball and Cohen (1999) term "learning communities"—spaces where teachers collaboratively construct professional knowledge, solve problems, and sustain commitment to innovation despite potential localized resistance.

Theme 5: Addressing Challenges and Enabling Conditions for Sustained Impact

While language teachers' narratives were predominantly affirmative regarding European program outcomes, they identified significant challenges and articulated conditions necessary for sustained, meaningful impact. Recognition of these enabling conditions provides insight into how teacher transformation translates into systemic educational change.

Adam identified temporal coordination and institutional resistance as primary challenges: *"Coordinating schedules and reconciling different curriculum requirements presented frequent challenges, particularly for cross-national teamwork. Some staff worried about the time investment required for project-based units."* His response strategy revealed professional agency and problem-solving capacity: *"I organized asynchronous exchanges and used collaborative platforms to give both teachers and students more flexibility. By co-planning and celebrating early wins, we won over skeptical staff and built positive momentum."* This narrative demonstrates how successful European program implementation requires not simply individual teacher transformation but also strategic navigation of institutional barriers through evidence-based advocacy and stakeholder engagement.

Claire similarly identified temporal and logistical constraints: *"Scheduling conflicts and curriculum requirements can sometimes make it tricky to devote enough time to creative, collaborative projects. Managing the technical side of digital exchanges (like ensuring stable internet during video calls) is occasionally stressful. Not all students are equally comfortable with new formats, so differentiation is often required."* Her reference to technical infrastructure challenges—"ensuring stable internet during video calls"—highlights how access to reliable technology, often taken for granted in wealthier European contexts, remains a practical barrier to full participation in digitally-mediated international collaboration.

Frauke highlighted concerns regarding data protection and parental anxiety: *"Parental privacy concerns. Clear guidelines, transparency became necessary."* This challenge reflects contemporary anxieties regarding student data protection in digital contexts, particularly when international communication involves exchange of student information and images across borders with different legal protections.

Notably, language teachers demonstrated significant agency in addressing these challenges. Rather than viewing barriers as insurmountable constraints, they described iterative problem-solving: adapting timelines to accommodate diverse institutional schedules, building stakeholder support through evidence of impact and celebration of successes, leveraging technology to overcome geographic and temporal constraints, and establishing transparent communication protocols addressing privacy concerns. This finding suggests that sustainable integration of European program outcomes may depend substantially on teachers' capacity to navigate institutional resistance and construct contextually-appropriate implementation models sensitive to local constraints while maintaining commitment to pedagogical innovation.

DISCUSSION

Implications For Understanding Professional Transformation

Language teachers' narratives reveal professional transformation operating across interconnected dimensions that extend beyond acquisition of new skills or techniques. Rather, transformation encompasses epistemological (fundamental reconceptualization of language learning and teaching), identity-based (redefined professional roles and self-understanding), methodological (adoption of collaborative, digital, communicative practices), and relational (formation of transnational professional networks and communities) dimensions.

These findings suggest that European programs function less as content-delivery mechanisms or skill-acquisition workshops and more as catalysts for fundamental professional reorientation. Language teachers did not simply acquire new techniques to add to existing pedagogical repertoires; rather, participation prompted deliberate and sustained reconsideration of their professional purpose, identity, epistemological foundations, and conceptualization of their role within contemporary, multilingual, digitally-mediated educational contexts. This transformation aligns with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), which emphasizes how professional development can precipitate shifts in teachers' fundamental frames of reference and meaning-making structures.

The transformation from "knowledge transmitter" to "facilitator" deserves particular analytical attention. This shift reflects alignment with contemporary pedagogical theory emphasizing student-centered, inquiry-based, dialogic approaches and acknowledges that language competence alone no longer constitutes sufficient professional expertise in contemporary contexts. Rather, the capacity to orchestrate meaningful intercultural communication, manage diverse learners with varying linguistic and cultural resources, facilitate authentic language use in collaborative contexts, and leverage technology for pedagogical purposes emerges as paramount professional competence. This reframing implicitly acknowledges that globalized, digitally-mediated contemporary education requires educators capable of navigating cultural and linguistic diversity as pedagogical resource rather than challenge or deficit.

Language teachers' emphasis on sustained international networking highlights the social dimensions of professional transformation often underemphasized in traditional, individual-focused professional development models. The validation and intellectual stimulation derived from transnational peer relationships—recognition from colleagues across Europe as pedagogical innovators and change agents—appear crucial for sustaining commitment to innovative practice and countering localized institutional skepticism. This finding extends Wenger's (1998) community of practice framework, suggesting that professional communities transcending institutional and national boundaries may offer particular sustenance for teachers implementing innovations that challenge conventional practice.

The thematic emphasis on authentic communication and technology integration reflects contemporary language teaching theory (communicative language teaching, digital pedagogy, multimodal literacies) while grounding these approaches in teachers' lived experience. Language teachers reported that European programs facilitated discovery that authentic communicative purpose—real audiences for whom language serves genuine communicative functions—transforms both pedagogy and student engagement. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis and Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, suggesting that European programs create conditions wherein these theoretical principles become concretely realized through international collaboration.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented here generate several implications for educational policy and professional development design:

1. **Temporal Flexibility and Administrative Support:** Sustained impact requires institutional recognition of the temporal demands of European program participation and implementation of innovative practices. Schools should allocate dedicated planning time for teachers developing and implementing international

collaborations, recognizing this work as integral to professional responsibilities rather than supplementary burden.

2. **Celebration and Public Recognition:** International professional development work should be celebrated and publicized within schools and communities to build stakeholder support, elevate teacher status, and create positive institutional culture supporting innovation. Media attention, parent appreciation, and administrative recognition functioned in these cases as powerful reinforcement of pedagogical value.
3. **Technology Infrastructure and Access:** Reliable digital infrastructure—stable internet, accessible platforms, technical support—remains essential for sustained international collaboration. Educational systems should invest in technology infrastructure and professional development ensuring all teachers can effectively leverage digital tools for international communication.
4. **Formal Recognition in Evaluation and Career Advancement:** European professional development work should be formally recognized within teacher evaluation frameworks and career advancement structures, signaling institutional valuation of international engagement and innovation.
5. **Peer Advocacy and Change Management:** Training teachers to strategically advocate for innovation, build stakeholder consensus, and navigate institutional resistance appears essential for translating individual transformation into systemic change. Professional development should include change management and advocacy competencies.

CONCLUSION

This thematic analysis of language educators' perspectives reveals profound professional transformation catalyzed by participation in European programs (Erasmus+ and eTwinning). Language teachers perceive transformation as fundamental reorientation operating across multiple interconnected dimensions: identity shifts from knowledge transmission to facilitation; adoption of communicative, student-centered, digitally-mediated pedagogies; substantially enhanced professional confidence and leadership positioning; and sustained participation in transnational communities of practice providing ongoing intellectual stimulation and peer support.

These findings underscore that European programs' value extends significantly beyond skills acquisition, methodological innovation, or expanded professional networks—though these constitute important outcomes. Rather, participation precipitates existential professional transformation, reshaping educators' fundamental understanding of their role, purpose, and identity within evolving educational landscapes. For language educators specifically, European programs facilitate alignment with contemporary multilingual, intercultural pedagogical frameworks grounded in celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity while simultaneously providing the international professional validation and transnational networking necessary for sustaining innovative practice within potentially skeptical institutional contexts.

The research suggests that teacher transformation functions not as linear progression but as complex, multidimensional reorientation involving reconsideration of pedagogical philosophy, professional identity, classroom practice, and professional relationships. Importantly, individual transformation catalyzes systemic change as participating teachers establish permanent international collaborations, advocate for curricular innovation, and model transformed practice for colleagues, gradually shifting school cultures toward internationalism, collaboration, and openness to pedagogical innovation.

Future research should examine sustainability of these transformations beyond immediate program participation, investigate mechanisms through which language teachers overcome institutional barriers to implementing European-derived innovations, explore how transformations at individual teacher level propagate systemic educational change within schools and educational systems, and examine differential impacts across varied European contexts and resource levels. Additionally, research examining how language teachers' international partnerships influence students' language learning outcomes, intercultural competence development, and

aspirations for international engagement would strengthen evidence regarding downstream impacts of teacher professional transformation.

The voices of language educators presented here testify to the profound professional significance of European collaborative programs. When supported by institutional structures enabling sustained implementation and celebrated within school communities, European professional development catalyzes not simply skill acquisition but fundamental professional reorientation—transformation that extends far beyond participating teachers to influence school cultures, student learning experiences, and evolving understandings of what contemporary teaching and learning entail.

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