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Whose action research is it?: Promoting linguistically sensitive teacher education in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the possibilities and challenges in turning a top-down action research project led by high-level public authorities into a shared and collaborative, multi-site and multi-professional bottom-up action research project. For this purpose, the article explores the initial stages of a European level action research project called ‘Linguistically Sensitive Teaching in All Classrooms’ that aimed to help teacher education systems better acknowledge linguistically diverse student populations in seven European countries. The analysis of the data sought to identify how to promote linguistically sensitive initial teacher education by incorporating reflection tasks into existing courses, and how to transform a top-down research project into a shared and collaborative bottom-up action project. The primary data consisted of 19 video-recorded online research meetings. Qualitative analysis was used to identify ‘critical moments’ in the data; these included a moment of major insight where transformation of project related ideas took place. The findings showed that linguistically sensitive teaching as a phenomenon is complex and the related terminology challenging to translate between languages and contexts. Furthermore, a European level action research requires negotiating a joint understanding of the roles of the participants and the individual perceptions of project ownership in each context. This suggests that a deeper understanding of the processes of participation and the partnerships involved in the action research may be as valuable as the actual reflection tools developed in the project in securing a systematic change towards linguistically sensitive teacher education.

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Introduction

This article explores the European-level action research project Linguistically Sensitive Teaching in All Classrooms (funded by the European Commission’s Erasmus+ programme, hereafter ‘Listiac’). The project aims to help teacher education systems in Europe become

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less fragmented regarding their acknowledgement of linguistically diverse student populations (cf. Eurydice 2019; European Commission 2017; OECD 2020). In this article, we explore the possibilities and challenges in turning a top-down action research project led by high-level public authorities (Ministries of Education or equivalent) into a shared and collaborative multi-site and multi-professional bottom-up action research project.

Linguistically sensitive teaching and the role of initial teacher education

The concept of linguistically sensitive teaching (henceforth, LST) refers to the linguistic dimension in education in a broad way. It includes awareness of the role of languages in learning, identity growth and wellbeing, as well as the concrete pedagogical actions needed to promote them in classroom activities, whole-school activities on an organisational level, and activities within the wider society. It also includes initial teacher education and educational policies that aim to raise future teachers' awareness of the linguistic dimension in education (Bergroth et al. 2021). Understanding of the concept in different educational contexts may vary. Meier (2018), for example, introduces the term 'multilingual socialisation in education', while García (2017) refers to 'critical multilingual language awareness and teacher education', and Lucas and Villegas (2013) refer to 'linguistically responsive teaching'. However, all of these concepts share a similar ideology of democratic citizenship, adding to and safeguarding social cohesion in society. In this article, it is hoped that LST in European initial teacher education can promote the creation of supportive and empowering educational environments by exploiting the potential of linguistic diversity in schools and society to achieve affective, social and cognitive outcomes for pupils in addressing the tenacious problem of social inequality in education. Therefore, there is a clear need, in the interest of all children and youth in the EU, to move away from one-language-only classroom practices towards more socially just and transformative educational policies and practices.

Despite Europe being linguistically and culturally diverse, a monolingual paradigm has prevailed, which has been – perhaps unconsciously – translated into monolingual pedagogical approaches. These approaches have mainstreamed all learners, regardless of their linguistic, ethnic, and social backgrounds, in the dominant language(s) of schooling (Young 2014). The persistent myth of the 'native' monolingual learner as the ideal (Pekarek-Doehler 2011; Strobbe et al. 2017) may have led multilingual classrooms to be seen as deviations, and thus something to be 'handled' rather than 'promoted'. Furthermore, languages in education have often been treated as 'separate paths that never cross', resulting in parallel monolingualism (Auger 2013). Similarly, the need to prepare all children for the highly diverse society in which they live may have been neglected (Bergroth and Hansell 2020; Bailey and Marsden 2017). The idea of mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies contests the 'monolingual paradigm' and promotes classrooms and schools where re-emergent multilingual realities, forms, practices, and identities come into being.

Key European policy documents confirm that education plays a central role in educating the youth and contributing to sustainable social cohesion (Lähdesmäki, Koistinen, and Ylönen 2020). The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') (Council of the European Union, 2009), for example, states that 'education should promote intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for

fundamental rights and the environment, as well as combat all forms of discrimination, equipping all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds'. Such policy documents place education, and consequently teachers, at the heart of supporting and promoting inclusive and linguistically sensitive teaching. In order to establish a more profound, lasting systematic change in norms and ideals, a paradigm change in pedagogical thinking is needed, even among teacher educator staff in initial teacher education.

Action research for promoting linguistically sensitive teaching

The action research spiral starts with problem identification, before any changes are planned (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). In the case of Listiac, the shared European problem, namely the difficulty in transforming monolingually framed education approaches into mainstreamed multilingual pedagogies, has been acknowledged. Teacher agency is always a reflection of prior experience and knowledge, in addition to beliefs, attitudes and perceptions (Portolés and Otilia 2020; Farrell 2018; Kalaja et al. 2016; Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015); therefore, in order to achieve the desired change in teacher cognition, both the education and the professional development of teachers should become focal areas. However, despite the widely acknowledged need to redesign these areas to better meet the needs of diverse populations, current educational provision in this field remains largely insufficient and fragmented (Auger 2013; European Commission 2017; Räsänen, Jokikokko, and Lampinen 2018; Vižintin 2017).

Concrete action within teacher education is needed in order to make this change, making the action research approach an attractive alternative. All action research approaches share a common feature, in that they enable practitioners to investigate and evaluate their work (McNiff and Whitehead 2011). Kitchen and Stevens (2008) define action research as 'a form of educational research wherein a professional, actively involved in practice, engages in systematic, intentional inquiry into some aspect of that practice for the purpose of understanding and improvement'. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2011), there are different sub-groupings of action research, which can be called interpretive action research and self-study action research. In the interpretive group, an external researcher reports on the actions of the practitioners and analyses these findings, while in the self-study group a practitioner theorises his/her own practices. In this article, both of these sub-groupings are actualised, and concepts such as 'practitioners' and 'professionals' refer to educational researchers, teacher educators and in-service teachers. We, as authors, conceptualise action research as an iterative process involving researchers and various educational practitioners acting together to perform a particular cycle of activities, including problem diagnosis, action intervention, and reflective learning. The researcher-practitioner roles are not seen as a strict dichotomy since a researcher could be an educational practitioner too. In other words, the project aims not to conduct research on practitioners, but with and among them.

In this article, we acknowledge democratic values as underlying ideals of action research that stress equality between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners are valued as researchers, and researchers as practitioners (Olin, Karlberg-Granlund, and Furu 2016; see also Darling-Hammond 2017). However, despite the democratic values underlying the ideals of action research, we cannot ignore the fact that the Listiac

project is funded by the European Commission as a high-level policy experiment. In fact, the aim of the project, to encourage and empower student teachers, teacher educators, and in-service teachers to reflect and improve their LST practices, is in line with European policy recommendations. Thus, the initiative to conduct the action research is top-down, rather than stemming from any internal drive to develop one's own practices. It has been argued that this kind of top-down orientation reduces action research to a policy tool for neo-liberal governance of education (cf. Moos 2017). However, we argue that the teaching profession, on any level, is combined with a commitment to help each student to thrive and succeed. In achieving this goal, teachers join forces with the different stakeholders in the education system in general, including policymakers, teacher educators, support staff, and a larger educational community, not to forget families and the students themselves. We see action research as a way to support this commitment within the larger educational system, where top-down and bottom-up approaches can meet in the middle, as they seek to answer questions such as 'what are we doing?', 'do we need to improve anything?' and 'if so, what do we have to improve and how should we improve it?' (McNiff 2017). In the best-case scenario, this kind of multi-level and multi-site action research yields significant changes in all participating practitioners' practices and improves the teaching/learning process throughout the system; it also provides practitioners with a more thorough understanding of their profession and their own professional identities (Farrell 2018; Kitchen and Stevens 2008; Sagor and Williams 2017). The practitioners are seen as knowledgeable and competent practitioners and theorists (McNiff 2017).

Reflective educational practices involve practitioners systematically gathering data about their practices in order to make informed decisions about their future practice (Farrell 2018). Therefore, action research requires active participant agency and involves more than just taking a few minutes for reflection. Combining both interpretive and self-study approaches and combining multi-site and multi-level action research might thus serve as means to provide more generalisable data to promote LST within teacher education across Europe beyond the professional development of individuals. However, while the transnational and intercultural approach of the Listiac project creates opportunities, it also creates tensions. It is not easy to develop tools for reflection that are both cross-contextual (or trans-contextual) and context-specific in terms of concrete action and practical implementation. It is hoped that the success of this type of action research lies in the methodological approach, firmly grounded in both the top-down and bottom-up processes, and in the various target groups having a strong agency and support. However, when speaking in terms of 'success' and 'reflection', one needs to be cautious. As Luttenberg, Meijer, and Oolbekkink-Marchand (2017) point out, uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent in reflection and can cause tensions and have a counterproductive effect. The policy measure designed to redefine teacher education curricula towards linguistically sensitive multilingual pedagogies in mainstream classrooms requires that practitioners, researcher-educators, and policy makers forge close partnerships to plan the change, enact the change, and then reflect on it. Furthermore, according to the action research spiral, this process needs to be followed up by re-planning, re-acting and re-reflecting on the policy measure (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014), even at the transnational level. In the following sections, we first present

the study and data and then proceed to analyse the initial phases of the Listiac action research project.

The study

The aim of the Listiac project was to plan an intervention that would provide evidence-based support for different stakeholders in gaining ownership of the action research itself and addressing the issues related to LST. The article has a similar two-fold focus, as it reflects on the initial stages of the project and the challenges encountered in conducting European-level action research. This initial stage eventually led to a concrete policy measure, namely a collection of existing instruments for reflection on linguistically sensitive teaching and fine-tuning them according to the needs of the project. Therefore, the article also serves to analyse the questions involved in creating this tool-box. The research questions guiding the analytical process are:

- (1) How can we promote mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies and linguistically sensitive initial teacher education with reflection? (Practice-oriented underpinnings)
- (2) How can a top-down research project be transformed into a shared and collaborative bottom-up action project? (Action research methodology-oriented underpinnings)

Listiac partnership

The Listiac partnership consisted of three Ministries of Education and nine universities specialising in teacher education and/or multi- and plurilingualism from seven different European countries (see Table 1). The partnership had extensive and diverse experience in the implementation of policies designed to promote multilingualism in varied

Table 1. Listiac partnership.

	Partner name, country	Is the researcher also an initial teacher educator?
Partners with full-time researcher appointed to the project (= the research group)	Åbo Akademi University, Finland	yes
	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain	yes
	University of Ljubljana, Slovenia	yes
	Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III, France	no
	Universiteit Gent, Belgium	no
	Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea/Universidad del País Vasco, Spain	no
Other partners	Universidade do Algarve, Portugal	
	Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania	
	University of Jyväskylä, Finland	
	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Slovenia	
	Ministry of Education, Directorate-General for Education, Portugal	
	Ministry of Education and Culture; National Agency for Education, Finland (associated partner)	

multilingual contexts. The participation of education ministries was a requirement for this kind of Erasmus+ policy innovation project, and the participating countries had already started developing new educational policies. These highlighted the need to address the role of teacher education to bring about the required competences for handling linguistic and cultural diversity among future teachers (for more on the policies see Bergroth et al. 2021). Furthermore, each individual partner had connections to local schools and in-service teachers.¹

All partners (excluding the ministries) had a part-time field worker appointed to the project who was responsible for the local interventions and data collection. In addition, there were six full-time researchers in the partnership. The data presented in this article refers to the tasks of this specific research group, which consisted of an international and multidisciplinary group of both junior and senior researchers. A common denominator for all the members was a solid background in multilingualism from the viewpoints of applied education, applied linguistics, the sociology of education or social anthropology. The varied backgrounds resulted in a mix of theoretical and methodological frameworks. The group also had varying amounts of expertise in developing projects with schools and in-service teachers, educational policy tasks, and developing projects in higher education, such as initial teacher education. These varied trajectories provided a good basis for the triangulation of data.

Data and analysis methodology

The intervention phase of the project was planned during Listiac research group meetings. The analysed data consists of video-recordings of 19 weekly online-meetings organised during March–December 2019. A meeting typically lasted for one and a half hours. The analysis of these video-recordings is loosely inspired by a narrative methodology. We authors approach the data as ‘the narrated story of the Listiac project’ and use the narrative dimensions model (Van De Mierop 2020) to guide our analysis. This model for analysis consists of six dimensions that can be grouped in two clusters around ‘the narrator’ and ‘the narrated events’. The cluster around ‘the narrator’ includes ownership, authorship and tellership, and the cluster around ‘the narrated events’ includes frequency, time and evaluation.

In the first phase of analysis, we as authors focused on the cluster around ‘the narrated events’. A recapitulation of past events during the project planning – which eventually led to the finalisation of the planned intervention actions – was condensed into a narrative account. It consisted of giving a chronological account of factual events and topic during the meetings. Furthermore, this narrative account was also based on the implied ‘why’ question asked by the imagined interlocutor (cf. De Fina 2009). This means that the authors accounted both for the plan as it was from the start and for the plan as it was in the end of this project phase and questioned ‘why had this change in plans happened?’. In this article, however, rather than giving an account of all the turns taken in the reflective process we have opted to focus on identifying the emerging ‘critical moments’ in the narrative (cf. Blommaert 2015). With a critical moment we refer to instances where major realisation or transformation of ideas/beliefs took place and that could provide answers to the question ‘why?’. The results of this analytic phase are described in the first reflection-action cycle in the results section.

Although 'the narrated events' were mainly connected to past events, it was clear that the dimension of time also included projections of possible events in the future. This was true especially when it was considered alongside the dimension of evaluation. This orientation towards future events can be explained by the fact that the planned actions would be taken in the intervention phase of the Listiac project after the planning phase described in this study. Similarly, the orientation towards evaluation was to be expected, as it is by no means irrelevant how the partners are assumed to experience the meaning of the actions that were planned in the research group. These insights led the authors to analyse the cluster around 'the narrator' and to ask who was telling the story of Listiac during the planning phase, who would be expected to tell it in the future, and what kind of a story would it be?

In the second phase of the analysis focus was therefore placed on the cluster around 'the narrator'. The related dimensions of ownership, authorship and tellership (Van De Mierop 2020) are closely connected to the aims of the article and especially to the tensions within action research initiated as top-down policy development project rather than bottom-up from the lived experiences of the participants. Traditional narratives focus on personally experienced events, just as participant action research in a traditional sense includes strong agency of the participant experiencing the identified problem. In a sense one owns the experiences in the story. As the aim of this article is to highlight the mediation between the policy level and practice level, parts of the Listiac story are told as vicarious experiences. This means that the members of the research group referred to events where their local colleagues' experiences were being retold (dimension of ownership) or specific emphasis was placed on membership categories (dimension of authorship). Such membership categories were identified as the narrator (not) being 'knowledgeable about LST', 'a teacher educator' and 'a researcher in the project', to mention just a few emerging categories. As authors we have not tried to identify and analyse all possible emerging categories in the data, rather to exemplify how these dimensions relate to the research questions at hands. The results of this analysis are discussed in the second reflection-action cycle in the results section.

Although inspired by the narrative inquiry in our analysis, we did not wish to stray from the continuous spiral of action research as our main focus. In terms of this spiral, problem identification and planning, acting, and reflecting is always followed up by re-planning, acting and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). Therefore, as a third phase of the analysis, we aligned our analysis in the first and second phases with these spirals of reflecting and re-reflecting (See Figure 1). In a sense, the project-related work packages (Planning, Experimentation protocol, Intervention and Evaluation) followed these major action research stages. This overarching action-reflection cycle started with the top-down acknowledgement by the European Commission of the need to develop initial teacher education curricula. This acknowledgement could also be conceptualized as the first critical moment of the project. However, the results of the analysis in the following sections are presented as two smaller and interwoven action reflection cycles. These are 1) First Action-Reflection Cycle – Analysis of Existing Reflection Tools, which accounts for an insight into why using existing reflection tools might be problematic within teacher education, and 2) Second Action-Reflection Cycle – Voices of the Participants, which provides an understanding of the importance/difficulty of reflecting on project

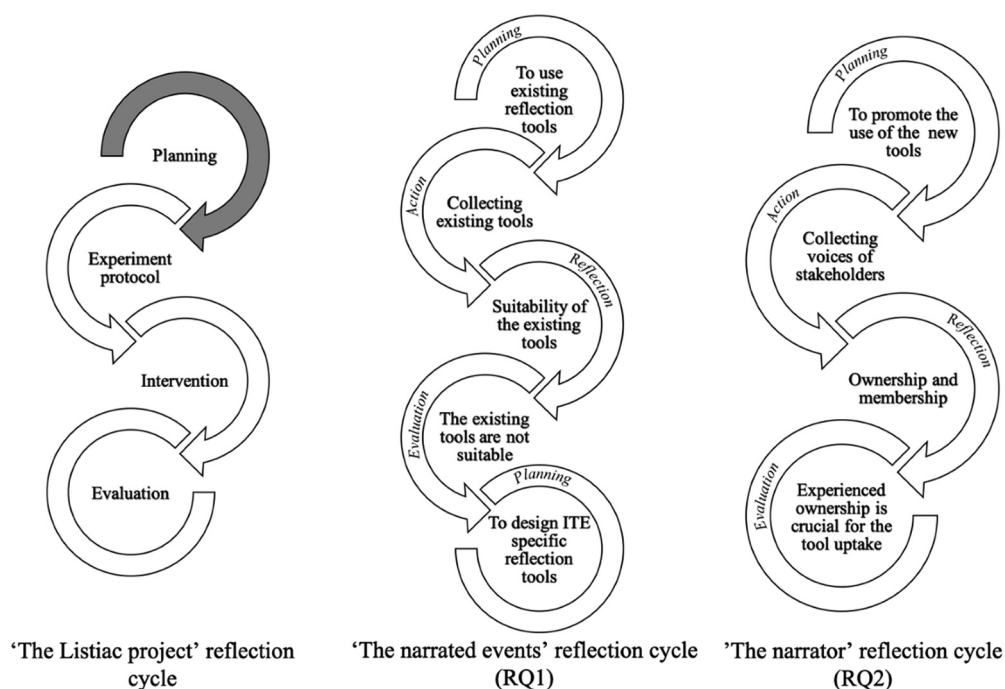


Figure 1. Third phase of analysis, aligning analysis with action research spirals.

ownership. Although both cycles are intertwined, the first relates more specifically to RQ1 (the rationale regarding the development of the tools) and the second to RQ2 (the growing understanding of European level action research).

Results

First action-reflection cycle – analysis of existing reflection tools

The research group had a shared understanding that good reflection tools had been designed in previous national and European projects, and that, potentially, these could be developed further in the Listiac project. European projects such as Roadmap for Schools, Maledive and Conbat+, and local innovations/projects such as the Slovenian Languages Matter (<https://www.jeziki-stejejo.si/en/>) and the Finnish Diversity in Education (<https://dived.fi/en/>), were frequently mentioned. Thus, the first Listiac related action-reflection cycle started with an aspiration to identify suitable existing tools for further development.

As a concrete action in this cycle, the research group asked all the partners to share any local tools for reflection that they knew of. The instructions were deliberately vague so that no potential tool would be thought to be outside this remit. Although the partners were at times confused about what would count as a 'reflection tool', the task eventually resulted in an extensive Excel spreadsheet including 40 different projects/products. The purpose of this action was not to provide a systematic overview of all the European reflection tools available, but rather to gain a more general overview of the current situation. In fact, the reactions and feedback given by the partners varied from

a realisation that there were no such tools available locally to a long list of impressive projects, with either regional, national, or international funding, highlighting the varying starting points for developing LST within teacher education. This European-level gathering of existing tools answered the vital question ‘what are we doing now?’, and thus also functioned as the first stage of reflection within the whole partnership.

These reported tools were analysed by grouping them in different categories, such as the tools’ relevance to the follow-up action research or to the intervention phase of the action cycle of the whole project (as shown in [Table 2](#)).

The numbers indicated in connection to the different reflection types in [Table 2](#) should be seen as indicators rather than as any true quantification of the data. This is because more information was provided for some tools than others. Nevertheless, the numbers did allow for some general observations. There was a tendency for the tools to be theory-based, drawing on the extensive research done in the area of mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies. Furthermore, the tools were intended for use by in-service teachers in various subjects, not only within language education. Most of the tools were local, but at the same time multilingual, and thus likely to be suitable for multilingual contexts. They were mainly aimed at practical rather than research use and, curiously, we found no existing tools that mentioned reflective journals or logbooks as sources of developmental data. This may indicate that action research had not been commonly used as a methodology when preparing reflection tools for LST. In action research, typically, practitioner logbooks/diaries are one of the main sources of information about the field work. As Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014, 177) point out, ‘In critical participatory action research, participants must make their own records as they go, for example in diaries or journals. We are inclined to think that keeping these kinds of records is the entry-ticket to the research group’ (*italics in the original text*). In the Listiac project, we planned to use partners’ logbooks to document the potential change in conceptions and attitudes as part of the intervention in the participating countries. With the help of logbooks, we hoped to ensure scalability and transferability whilst still catering for the various (linguistic) needs in their differing national contexts.

Reflecting on the data presented in [Table 2](#) led the research group to question why these various reflection tools had not been incorporated into initial teacher education to a greater degree. A critical moment/insight in this reflection was provided by an outside source; simultaneously with the collection of the reflection tools, two evaluations conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre were published. One of them reported, alarmingly, that 91% of teachers in the school subject ‘Finnish as the second official language’ had never or only seldom used Common European Framework of Reference for Languages CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018) criteria as the basis of their assessment, and 98% of the teachers said they had never received any in-service training in using the framework (Åkerlund, Marjanen, and Lepola 2019). Participation in this event revealed that even well-established frameworks such as CEFR seem to be unknown, even to in-service language teachers.

This insight was important, as the research group had planned to incorporate CEFR in the project. Given that language teachers were not particularly familiar with this European-level tool, we could imagine how unfamiliar it would be for those not working within language education. This insight was deepened when the research team looked for inspiration from the project The Quality Assurance Matrix for CEFR Use (ECML – European

Centre for Modern Languages 2019). This action-oriented approach was intended to support teachers in engaging in curriculum renewal supported by the CEFR vision of teaching and learning, and it had been identified by the research group as potentially relevant for curriculum renewal that supports mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies. However, they concluded that in order to be able to use this tool one should already be very familiar with CEFR. For example, the teacher educators were expected to reflect on whether the CEFR descriptive scheme and descriptors are used to analyse learner needs, develop a curriculum related to real world needs, which focuses on learners as language users. In other words, the tool was too advanced and specialised as a reflection tool to be used by all students at the beginning of their initial teacher studies.

During the analysis of the existing tools, the research group identified other problematic aspects. One of them was the languages of the tools. Given that linguistically sensitive teaching is in itself a complex and multidimensional topic, the tools themselves needed to be relatively simple so they would be fairly easy to translate. For use in teacher education it would be necessary to have the tools in the local languages. Another problem was the scientific terminology used. The tools were often designed with linguistic rather than education-oriented frameworks, and at times the terminology used required familiarity with specialised concepts such as ‘translanguaging’, ‘systemic-functional linguistics’, ‘scaffolding’ and ‘plurilingualism’. These terms and concepts are not always easily translatable. Even in cases where they have equivalents in the local language, the understanding of the concepts could not be taken for granted when working with mainstream teacher educators who did not necessarily have prior experience of linguistics or multilingual pedagogies.

Taken together, the first cycles of planning for the action and reflection resulted in the insight that it was not optimal to try to develop existing tools for use in the Listiac project. The quality of the existing tools was deemed to be very high and evidence-based, but at the same time they were considered too advanced or too context-specific to be used for mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies, especially in the early stages of teacher education. It was decided that the Listiac reflection tools, by contrast, should require only a very basic understanding of LST, thus lowering the threshold to take a closer look at other existing tools later in professional life. Furthermore, in order for LST not to be treated as an extra on top of the normal tasks within the teacher education curricula, it was important to incorporate the views of current European and local education policies in order to demonstrate the links between LST and the teaching profession. This means that reflections about LST should not only focus on didactical solutions in the classroom but must also form part of a holistic whole-school approach.

Second action-reflection cycle – views of the participants

The second round of reflection cycles partly overlapped with finalising the analysis of the existing reflections tools. The aim of this round was to identify key actors and possible courses in initial teacher education structures in Europe in which the actual intervention could take place (for more information see Bergroth et al. 2021). In this planning cycle, the research group deemed it important to include the views of colleagues and students. This was done as part of recognising the unpredictable nature of any social action and identifying previously unrecognised constraints in the situation (cf. Kemmis, McTaggart,

and Nixon 2014). It was hoped that including the views of teacher educators and students who were not actively participating in the Listiac project would provide flexibility in a greater range of circumstances.

The process of transforming top-down international action research into a shared and collaborative, local, bottom-up action project is explained here using three different excerpts from research group conversations. In a way, they all serve as ‘critical moments’, highlighting important understandings of the nature of the action research. These excerpts also align with ‘the narrator’ cluster dimensions ownership and authorship (Van De Mierop 2020) as they exemplify the importance of authorship so that different stakeholders, as representatives of various groups of educational actors, feel ownership of the project. This ownership entails gaining insight into how ones’ own experiences might be related to the project aims, even if one has not been actively involved in the early stages of the project. Therefore, the first excerpt focuses on the importance of finding a shared understanding of how to present the action project aims. In the second, the importance of reflecting on LST-related issues with colleagues is highlighted, and the third shows how the researchers also need to reflect on their own identity as subject and object of the action research.

8 May 2019 (timestamp 40:27)

R1: It’s about schools and teacher education, it’s not about language teachers. And I think that’s also one of the big issues that we have to remember, so that we are talking in the right ways. I actually had a good talk with [name omitted] because she is not involved in this kind of linguistically sensitive teaching, she is a smart woman, but it’s a new way of thinking for her, and I think it’s a good thing that we have these people who represent those who are not yet so aware of these kinds of things. It was interesting how she suddenly, when we talked about it, she understood that linguistically sensitive teaching is not only about the things that you do as a teacher in front of a classroom, it is how you see the person who is your student. Then it’s perhaps not all about the language, it’s about seeing the student or the pupil, and I think we have to be very aware that we do not always talk about the language, because it puts the focus on the wrong aspects in the eyes of those teachers who see language a bit more traditionally or small-scale than we do.

R2: So the way to think about that is what is [the] student identity or plural identities.

In this excerpt, a member of the research team reveals how his/her understanding of the complexity of the issue broadened during dialogue with a colleague. The shared understanding of the role of the language as a secondary, but nevertheless highly important, aspect of LST can be seen in the statement ‘I think we have to be very aware that we do not always talk about the language’, which is then confirmed by another researcher in the team. He/she suggests that in cases like these, it might be easier to gain the attention of teacher educators if the reflection was focused on promoting plural student identities rather than language (cf. Auger, Adam-Maillet, and Thamin 2018 on working with different educational stakeholders’ conceptions of the ‘Other’). In a similar manner, the following excerpt underlines the need to build the reflection tools in close partnership with the students and teacher educators:

9 May 2019 (timestamp 18:00)

R3: You were talking about students in teacher education being the focus of the reflection, right? But we were also thinking, for example, we talked about this linguistically sensitive teaching staff and the reflection tools and what is said about that in the curriculum, for example in [place omitted]. It is important too that the teacher trainers, so basically our colleagues, could also reflect on that before. So, we were also thinking about having a focus on the teachers who are teaching the three subjects where we can implement the reflection. So, it's going to be like, maybe eight teachers, [name omitted] would also be one of them, and also then many teachers who are in the schools because they are training in in-service teacher [education], so we would ... If we want to do this in the classroom, maybe we have to think about this ourselves. I think it is very clear that we will not agree. All of us. (laughter)

In this excerpt, another member of the research group is referring to an earlier discussion about collecting student teachers' views on the reflection tools. He/she points out it would be equally important to collect reflections and views from the teacher educators training these student teachers. The researcher includes himself/herself in the intervention action and concludes that before they conduct these reflections with students, they should reflect on the same issues in advance (If we want to do this in the classroom, maybe we have to think about this ourselves). His/her remark about the possible differences in opinions (I think it is very clear that we will not agree. All of us.) is further evidence of the unpredictable nature of social action.

These two excerpts show how the researchers who work within teacher education themselves approached the actions as lived experiences. They reflected on their own actions, experiences, and their familiarity with colleagues affected by the project despite not being actively involved in the planning phase. On the other hand, the other researchers who worked with educational issues but who were not employed as teacher educators tended to focus on questions about promoting the intervention from an outsider perspective, including how to build contacts within teacher education and how many lecture hours would be needed to implement the intervention. Thus, they often focused on the tasks related to action research as something to be implemented rather than as an ongoing development from within (cf. Lucas et al. 2018). These two different angles of approach resulted in the need to be explicit about what reflection tools were created for the intervention itself, that is, the products that could be used as part of raising awareness of LST, and which were used to collect data regarding the action processes in order to be able to theorise and generalise some of the findings. However, as the third excerpt shows, the researchers' conceptions of their own role in the project were fluid and changing during the initial stages of the project, even among those who worked in teacher education institutes.

13 November 2019 (timestamp 10:17)

R1: This is just a quick reflection, but I wonder if we conceptualise 'the teacher' and 'the participant' differently? In the scope of our project there are not researchers/participants as separate entities, but rather we are all participants, including us project partners. The action we are undertaking is 'European teacher education', so we are very much active participants developing our own teaching.

R4: Hmm, for me, a teacher is also a participant in this project, but not every participant is a teacher as there are also teacher educators (some of them project partners) and student teachers. I guess I didn't see myself (a researcher) as a participant before because I didn't think the reflection tool would have an immediate effect on my own teaching, given that my teaching context is slightly different, but I see now that I was probably mistaken, because everything we're doing for the project has some (indirect or direct) effect on my own teaching as well, regardless of the context.

R1: Yes, every teacher, whatever they teach, should become more linguistically sensitive. My colleague recently asked me 'who owns this action research?', and the question made me realise that we should avoid the unnecessary division between 'objects and subjects' of research.

In the excerpt, the researcher realises that the concept of 'participant' is wider than those who use the newly designed reflection tools in their own teaching or studies. He/she concludes this by stating that everything we're doing for the project has some (indirect or direct) effect on my own teaching as well, regardless of the context, thus pinpointing the aim of the project to change teacher educators' conceptions and awareness of LST rather than solely focusing on the implementation of the reflection tools.

The research group also wanted to collect the views of student teachers. To achieve this, inspiration was drawn from a reflection task designed for in-service training for teachers in early childhood education and care (for a more in-depth description see Bergroth and Hansell 2020). By collecting students' views, the research group hoped to be able to empower student teachers within the action research project and give them an opportunity to participate in formulating the reflection tools. This was done during summer and autumn 2019.

Student teachers' views were collected in Vaasa (Finland) and Barcelona (Catalonia/Spain) in the form of pilots. The objective of the pilots was twofold: 1) to include student teachers' views and feedback on the reflection tasks before the wider European-level intervention started; and 2) to carry out a first analysis of the ideas and beliefs of student teachers about the LST training situation in their institutions. In Barcelona, the student group reflection task was tested with a group of 35 university student teachers in their last year and last semester of the Primary Education Degree. In groups of six or seven, the student teachers first conducted an individual SWOT analysis (Bergroth and Hansell 2020), and then discussed their ideas and completed a joint group SWOT analysis. The analysis of the students' reflections is described in Llompart and Moore (2020). The issues students raised in their conversations served as a starting point when planning reflection tasks suitable for different education stages. In Vaasa, an observation protocol was tested with a group of 54 university student teachers at the intermediate stage (third year of a five-year programme). First, the students observed different aspects of LST individually in various primary schools in Finland, and then they shared their findings and thoughts about the observations and the observation task itself in groups of between four and six. The analysis of the students' reflections is described in Bergroth and Haagensen (2020). The students found the observation tasks meaningful, in general, even if they were deemed challenging at times. They reported that the reflection tasks had made them more aware of the need for LST, but that it would be good if they could be better prepared for the tasks, and they called for the addition of LST-related aspects as part of their studies.

Taken together, the second cycles of planning for the action and reflection resulted in an understanding that it was important to reflect on the action research itself. In large-scale action projects such as Listiac, it is not evident who feels ownership in developing the joint action. If the collaborative approach had been neglected, it might have resulted in a more top-down project where new ideas were implemented by outsiders, despite the aspiration of being a shared project. This fits well with the call for practice-embedded development, what Lucas, Strom, Bratkovich and Wnuk (2018, 167–168) claim to be ‘a very welcome move away from the familiar approach of having an external expert lead and occasional workshops for teachers’.

Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this article was two-fold. It aimed to discuss how to promote mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies and linguistically sensitive initial teacher education with reflection, and how to transform a top-down research project into a shared and collaborative bottom-up action project. The video-recording data was approached from a narrative dimensions model (Van De Mierop 2020).

The narrative analysis of the cluster of ‘narrated events’ during the first action research cycle led to an understanding of why a change in the original plans had occurred. The plan had been to further develop existing reflection tools to better suit the needs of ITE; however, this plan was revised as a result of several insights, which we called ‘critical moments’. These included both events outside the recorded meetings and reflections during the meetings. As a concrete result of the first action cycle an overview of the ideas generated about how to promote multilingual pedagogies and LST in teacher education is given in Table 3. Two categories of instruments were planned: one to be used in joint reflection about LST with student teachers and among teacher educators, and another for the documentation of the action undertaken (i.e. reflections) in the project. As the approach utilised within the Listiac project was to experiment, learn and develop together rather than to assess or to evaluate current practices, it was essential to be clear about the instruments developed for the intervention itself and those developed for the documentation of the changes in thinking that, hopefully, occur while implementing the intervention instruments. In line with action research, logbooks were the main documentation instrument, but the use of surveys and interviews was also planned in order to support the findings. Any examples of good practice found in the local actions in Europe were also to be documented. The reflection instruments, on the other hand, were planned to be a realistic ‘less is more’ type of toolkit, and the views of teacher educators, student teachers, and other relevant stakeholders were included in the planning. The reflection tasks were mainly intended to be used in initial teacher training as an integral part of various education-related courses at different stages of the training. However, the tasks were designed so that, with slight adjustments, they could easily be used with in-service teachers or in professional development courses for teachers. They were also planned in such a way that they did not require the participants to have any deep knowledge of multilingual pedagogies.

Regarding the second aim of the article, namely reflection on the possibilities and challenges in adapting the action research approach from the European level to local circumstances, it was concluded that this would require careful joint planning. The focus

Table 3. The Listiac action research project: an overview of research instruments for documenting the action research and instruments for reflection.

	Instrument	Who organises?	What/why?
Data collection for action research and policy recommendations	Logbooks	Researcher	Documentation of the process, including formal and informal conversations, observations in initial teacher education courses, in classrooms, etc.
	Online survey	Researcher	Documentation of attitudes and beliefs of teacher educators, in-service teachers and student teachers.
	Semi-structured interviews	Researcher	Comparable data on some experiences of the action research process and beliefs regarding LST of teacher educators or student teachers.
	Good practices	Researcher	Documenting good practices identified in the local data collection.
Reflections for change (reflection tool)	Instrument	Who organises? Who participates?	What/why?
	Observation protocol	Researcher/teacher educator Student teachers (teacher educators, supervisors)	To encourage students to observe and reflect on ways to improve LST practices in schools they visit. Optional: for supervisors to observe and reflect on (together with students) how student teaching can become more LST, or in-service teachers can observe each other.
	Student reflection 1	Researcher/teacher educator Beginning-stage student teachers	To elicit beliefs, possibilities and challenges from teacher educators organising the course. To encourage student teachers' reflections on what LST is.
	Student reflection 2	Researcher/teacher educator Intermediate-stage student teachers	To elicit beliefs, possibilities and challenges from teacher educators organising the course. To encourage student teachers' reflections on how to promote LST in classrooms.
	Student reflection 3	Researcher/teacher educator Advanced-stage student teachers	To elicit beliefs, possibilities and challenges from teacher educators organising the course. To encourage student teachers' reflections on how to promote LST taking a whole-school approach.
	Staff reflection	Researcher/director for the staff (or similar) Teacher educators, in-service teachers	To elicit beliefs, possibilities and challenges in the relevant professional community regarding how to promote LST in the workplace. Reflections on both current practices and beliefs and concrete ideas for improvement.

was turned from narrated events to the people who narrated the story of Listiac. The narrative analysis of the cluster around 'the narrator' conducted during the second action research cycle showed that without securing this rather time-consuming joint ownership of the action research, it risked remaining a top-down request to implement new things in initial teacher education. It was not easy to apply any measurable outcome related to this process. We opted to conceptualise the active participation of any practitioner in itself as an important first step on the road to critically examining and evaluating existing beliefs and taking the action needed in working towards LST. Guaranteeing the uptake of the

reflection instruments by teacher educators, even after the project itself has ended, requires joint ownership of the actions undertaken.

It can thus be concluded that the processes of planning the action project and fine-tuning the experiment were important points for reflection regarding the roles of the researchers, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers. The narrative dimensions approach used in the study helped to give an analytic framework for acknowledging both the events and the various narrators. It allowed the research group to examine the different kinds of insider/outsider roles of the researchers with regard to teacher education. In addition, it offered opportunities to be observant about the language of science and how to include the 'Other', with a shared language and shared theoretical frameworks, while still learning from each other's insights. European-level cooperation and joint action in connection with teacher education actualised the need to question and become aware of beliefs about teacher education that were easily taken for granted. Together with the questions of whether the project was a one-off implementation or an ongoing development (cf. Lucas et al. 2018), who was expected to reflect on LST and why, and how these reflections related to the ability to act according to the reflections (cf. McNiff and Whitehead 2011), these issues proved European-level action research to be a task that should not be taken lightly. This means that action research should not be reduced to a policy tool for neo-liberal governance of education (cf. Moos 2017), but rather it needs to retain its integrity to support deliberative practices. It also means that if various autonomous and critical participants across Europe are to experience a policy change as meaningful in relation to teacher education practices, not just in high-level policy documents, the action research approach might be a good route to take.

Note

1. The actions/views of these associated partners are not currently included in the analysis presented here due to the project being at an early stage.

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