

# Research for change: Collaborative reflexivity as a means to promote professional growth when integrating content and language in higher education

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Die Reflexion über die eigenen Vorstellungen und Lehrpraktiken im Verhältnis zu denen anderer erfordert die Fähigkeit, die eigenen Überzeugungen, Werte und Erfahrungen kritisch zu hinterfragen. Dies ist insbesondere in interdisziplinären Forschungskontexten, wie etwa integrierter Fach- und Sprachunterricht an der Hochschule, von entscheidender Bedeutung. In diesem Bereich können Kooperationen zwischen Forschenden, Lehrkräften und Sprachexpert:innen dazu beitragen, innovative Methoden und transformative Praktiken zu erkunden, die über die traditionellen Grenzen der jeweiligen Disziplinen hinausgehen. Der vorliegende Beitrag beleuchtet die Bedeutung kollaborativer Reflexivität im Rahmen eines Collaborative Action Research (CAR)-Projekts. Die vorliegende qualitative Studie wurde an einem Institut für Informatik an einer Fachhochschule in Österreich durchgeführt. Sie analysiert retrospektive Reflexionsaussagen von drei Forschenden und drei Lehrkräften, die an einem kollaborativen Aktionsforschungsprojekt beteiligt waren, und nutzt dabei einen hybriden Ansatz zur thematischen Analyse. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass die im CAR erforderliche Reflexivität zu positiven Veränderungen führen kann, da kollaborative Interaktionen den Austausch von Ideen zu pädagogischen Ansätzen und fachlichen Perspektiven erleichtern.

### Stichwörter:

Kollaborative Aktionsforschung, Integrierter Fach- und Sprachunterricht an der Hochschule, Reflexivität, transdisziplinäre Kontexte.

### Keywords:

Collaborative Action Research (CAR), Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ILCHE), reflexivity, cross-disciplinary settings.



## 1. Introduction

The present study involved a language specialist and a teacher educator from a generalist full university in Austria as well as a language teacher and three content teachers from an Austrian University of Applied Sciences. Recognizing the vital role of collaboration in research and practice, the university felt the need to cooperate more closely with the University of Applied Sciences since many of their language graduates (i.e. future English Language teachers) teach at similar institutions in Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE) settings where they often need to take on a joint role in instruction along with content teachers from diverse subjects.

One of the main difficulties novice English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals in such ICLHE settings face is that the content teachers they work with tend to underestimate the centrality of language, discourses and texts in the construction of knowledge (see also Lee & Poynton 2000). This is why we as a team of teacher trainers and language experts have been working to familiarize primarily content teachers of other institutions with concepts from applied linguistics to make them reflect on the role of language and their own teaching practices, which is often a missing element in the ICLHE classroom.

In an attempt to combine research and practice, we then decided to engage in Collaborative Action Research (CAR), thus allowing ELT teachers, language specialists and content specialists to work more closely together and eventually increase their efficiency in team teaching and beyond.

In doing so, we started from the assumption that reflexive processes and interdisciplinary cooperation would benefit the CAR process. Interdisciplinarity has been said to broaden research perspectives, helping teachers and researchers to adopt a new viewpoint, enabling them to see the whole picture (Guignon & Morrisette 2013: 78):

"When we set out to discover a place, on a mountain hike for example, we take a path that gradually gives us a glimpse of a whole landscape [...] The same is true of research conducted within disciplines [...] [I]t is always possible to take a fresh look at a subject by [...] proposing an approach that is not so familiar in one discipline but may be standard practice in another." [authors' translation]

Guignon and Morrisette's idea of gradually expanding horizons is one of the main aims of our interdisciplinary collaboration.

The project spanned six years of intensive and fruitful exchanges (see Kletzenbauer et al. 2022) of ideas between teacher trainers, linguists and methodologists on the one hand and content teachers in IT subjects on the other hand. Over these six years, this has led to more innovative research and teaching practices, including team-teaching opportunities between content and language teachers, joint conference contributions, and a shared interest in ICLHE research. Additionally, it has facilitated the development of models such as the Cycle of Collaborative Reflexivity (see Figure 1), which emphasizes

structured iterative reflection among educators and researchers at each stage of the collaboration to drive meaningful change in teaching and research practices.

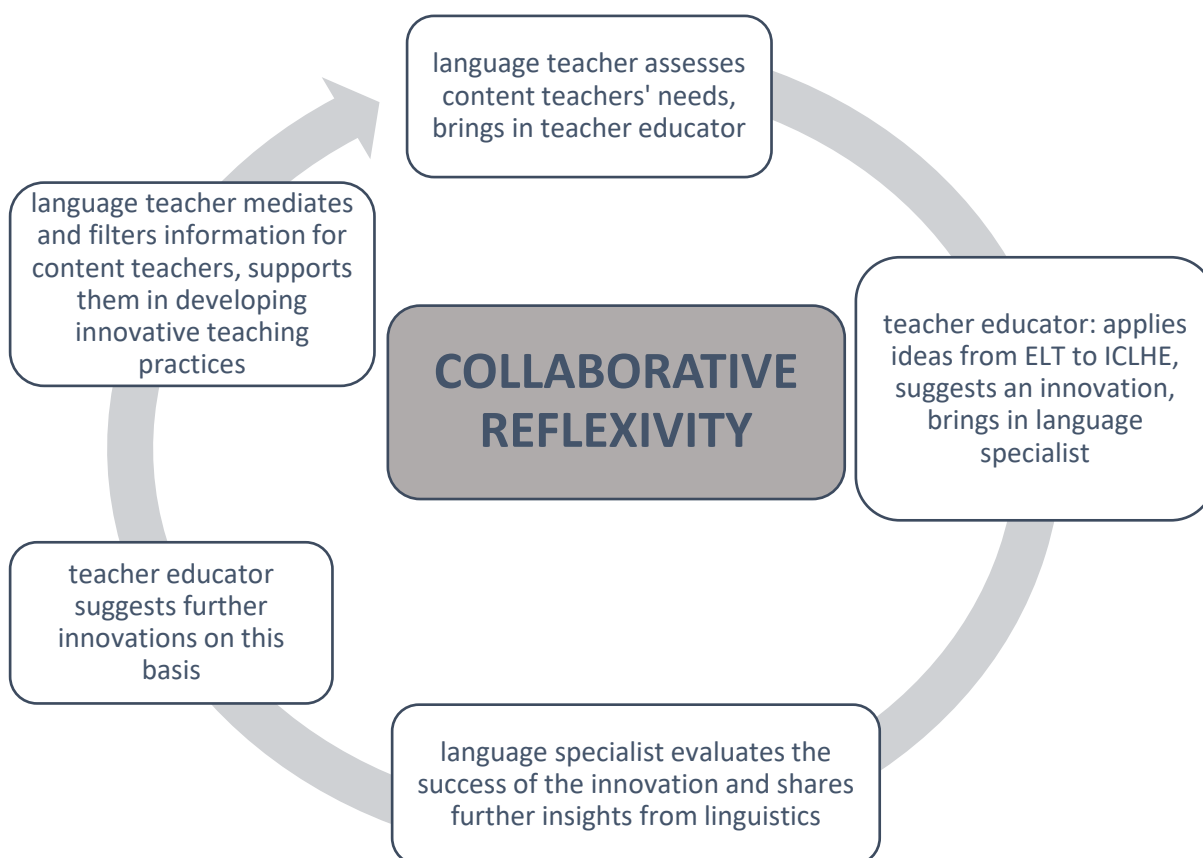


Fig.1: Cycle of Collaborative Reflexivity (authors' own illustration)

The goal of the study discussed in this paper was to obtain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that lead to change in ICLHE research and teaching settings by means of employing collaborative reflexivity. The paper will also make the case for implementing collaborative reflexivity within institutions to foster more interdisciplinary collaboration between content and language teachers in communities of practice (CoPs), ultimately enhancing (ICLHE) pedagogy and research in general.

## 2. Applying Reflexivity to CAR in CoPs

Co-produced research entails collaboration between partners at every stage of the research process (Facer & Enright, 2016), intentionally positioning individuals and parties involved as partners rather than research samples (Armstrong and Alsop 2010; Pearce 2008). The trend towards participatory practices has long been common in areas such as the arts, industry, and government (Facer & Enright, 2016), and it has now also reached academia. Thus, as academic research increasingly demands interdisciplinary

cooperation, the competence to work together and co-create ideas outside one's own scientific domain has become vital. The demand for enhancing research collaborations to cross-fertilize ideas and develop a broader view of one's own field has also been recognized by academic institutions and researchers involved in higher education (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Woolhouse et al. 2020).

Moreover, due to the permeability of disciplinary and increasingly also institutional boundaries, new forms of collaboration had to be established since academic performance is also evaluated and accountable to bodies outside the academic community. In fact, co-production encompasses diverse meanings and expectations that differ depending on the context. As such, they can also serve various political and institutional objectives (Howard & Thomas-Huges 2021).

Therefore, in academic contexts, the creation of 'Communities of Practice (CoP) is very important because of the shared resources and practices (i.e. shared repertoire) that emerge from them. These CoPs represent an approach to knowledge generation in which researchers collaborate closely with research beneficiaries and users. Within this co-production framework, the team works together to identify meaningful problems, develop a research strategy that is relevant and comprehensible to all participants, interpret findings in ways that hold value for each stakeholder, and collaboratively share and, when possible, implement the results (McLean et al. 2023).

Morrisette and Guignon (2006) suggest a framework for effective co-production which includes a network of mutual influences that form around a practice. This involves adaptations or borrowing of conventions between professional groups. Their framework also emphasizes the social dimensions of learning and professional development (i.e. social learning and the sociology of professions), providing a comprehensive view of how professionals grow and evolve within their fields through collaboration.

CoPs enable members to learn from each other and develop a shared repertoire of resources by engaging in a process of collective learning and adopting a new viewpoint. By sharing concepts, procedures, language and stories, the tacit knowledge of the community is made explicit. This includes the understanding of the social structures and dynamics that shape professional practice and identity (for example how professionals see themselves and their roles). This ensures professional growth as learning occurs through social interactions and collaborations (Thomas-Hughes 2018).

The professional growth in CoPs is often triggered by individuals who adopt new ideas and methods. Becker (1988) speaks of so-called "Mavericks" who deviate from the conventional norms, practices, or standards of a particular field or

profession to bring innovation, new ideas, or unconventional methods to their work as drivers of change.

In these forms of collaboration, different types of knowledge are generated: experiential (gained through direct experiences), practical (knowing how to do something through practice), propositional (knowledge expressed in statements and theories), and presentational (how experiential knowledge is organized) (Heron 1996; Heron & Reason 2006). Aligning these different types of knowledge requires cycles of reflection and action within the research process.

The cycle of cross-disciplinary collaboration proposed in Kletzenbauer et al. (2022) involves collaborative reflexivity at each stage, e.g., when the language teacher brings in the teacher educator or when the language teacher mediates information for the content teachers. Such collaborative reflexive practice can only happen in a space of trust (Kletzenbauer et al. 2022) which is built through open communication, mutual respect, and shared professional goals. This space of trust allows educators to engage in honest dialogue, take risks in their practice, and critically reflect on their roles without fear of judgment. It fosters a sense of psychological safety, where different perspectives are valued, and participants feel empowered to contribute their expertise. Moreover, trust is reinforced through sustained collaboration, transparent decision-making, and a commitment to supporting each other's professional growth.

The establishment of a space of trust might also be an indicator for 'quality' in co-produced research as it is often defined by the strength of relationships between academic and (non-academic) partners, rather than defining itself by specific research questions (Bell & Pahl 2018: 109; Campbell et al. 2016: 38). Facer et al. (2016) suggest that a key indicator of quality is a project's ability to reflexively situate itself within its context and clearly articulate its choices regarding accountability, decision-making, goals, and methods.

Research indicates that quality in co-produced research is also associated with transparent decision-making, perceived usefulness by partners, potential for social change, and consistency of new knowledge across partners (Howard & Thomas-Hughes 2021). According to Bell and Pahl (2018) as well as Facer and Enright (2016), it can inspire transformative social change and reveal crucial, yet undiscovered, knowledge necessary for such change (see for example Kletzenbauer et al. 2022).

Applying reflexivity to CAR entails taking researcher positionality and research team dynamics into account. In qualitative approaches to collaborative research, the positionality of researchers, for example whether they are insiders or outsiders, can impact the generation of knowledge (Berger 2015). One of the main advantages of collaborative reflexivity is that the perspectives and biases of co-producers of knowledge are considered, in particular when data is analysed and conclusions are drawn (Goodson & Phillimore 2012: 12).

However, reflexive accounting is frequently missing from research reports, even though it is such a vital component for co-production (Banks et al. 2014; Durose et al. 2012) and even more so for the iterative cycles of action and reflection in action research (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003).

In these cycles, the centrality of reflexivity becomes obvious, as Joy et al. point out: "Reflexivity is a type of thinking, a mode of research practice. It involves a researcher who is present as a person [*italics in the original*] in the research process, someone who is questioning, critical, and considered in all aspects of what they do, who they do it with, and the context(s) in which they do it" (Joy et al. 2024, n.p.). This strong presence of the researcher adds value to the research.

In line with Godínez Martínez (2022:100), we therefore argue that combining CAR and reflexive processes opens up many opportunities for development and growth: "[T]hrough both collaborative action research and reflective processes, opportunities are provided [...] to work together and address common problems, share experiences, and develop their individual and collective repertoires to deal with shared difficulties providing new ways of approaching practice and fostering continuous professional development according to personal teaching needs."

Yosief et al. (2024: 213) likewise highlight the value of reflexivity for a research team in a CAR context as it fosters trust among the researchers: "The reflective discussions we conducted supported us to create a spirit of collaborative learning and trust among us. We manifested integrity, divulged our limitations, and showed readiness to support each other."

These considerations and perspectives are reflected in the research methodology of the present study which also highlights how collaborative reflexivity, particularly within a CAR framework, enhances professional growth and a culture of trust and continuous improvement.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Aim of the Study*

The study aimed to explore the mechanisms driving change in ICLHE teaching and research settings through collaborative reflexivity. The guiding questions for these statements were developed by the researchers to reflect the cycle of collaborative reflexivity (see Fig. 1) and address the different phases in the collaboration.

#### *3.2 Participants and Context*

The study involved six participants: three researchers (the authors of this paper) and three content teachers working in an ICLHE setting (see Table 1). The participants provided retrospective reflexive statements reflecting on their experiences in the collaboration. In accordance with the relevant guidelines for

ethical research practices, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

				Teaching experience in ICLHE	Research experience in ICLHE	Years of collaboration
	Researcher 1	Language specialist	English Department, University of Graz	X	> 10 years	> 5 years
	Researcher 2	Teacher educator	English Department, University of Graz	X	> 7 years	> 10 years
	Researcher 3	ESP teacher	Computing Department, FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences)	> 10 years	> 10 years	> 10 years
	Content Teacher 1	IT specialist	Computing Department, FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences)	> 15 years	> 7 years	> 10 years
	Content Teacher 2	IT specialist	Computing Department, FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences)	> 15 years	> 4 years	> 10 years
	Content Teacher 3	IT Law specialist	Computing Department, FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences)	> 10 years	> 3 years	> 5 years

Table 1: Overview of Participant Information

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this qualitative study were collected in the form of retrospective reflexive statements written by three researchers (the authors of this paper) and three participants (content teachers teaching ICLHE at a computing department at a University of Applied Sciences).

Once data collection was completed, the researchers read each other's statements, plus the participant statements to familiarise themselves with the data and get a sense of the overall content. To reflect the collaborative and reflective nature of the research, this was followed by one team-reflexive discussion between the researchers immediately afterwards. Such discussions are proposed by Olmos-Vega et al. (2023: 246) as a way of harnessing reflexivity in research as "a powerful way to understand each team member's position within the research and how this ensemble could impact the results". Thus, the discussion allowed the researchers to reflect on their positions within

the study and consider how the resulting perspectives might influence the findings.

Additionally, in the discussion session, the first codes were generated by identifying and labelling significant information in the data. These initial codes were then sorted into categories and subcategories which were refined in three waves of coding (see Fig. 2). The next step was searching for themes: overarching themes namely teacher reflection, researcher reflections, teacher change and researcher change were developed from the categories, exploring how they connect and contribute to a broader understanding. The themes were reviewed, defined and named in several coding waves. In doing so, a hybrid approach to Thematic Analysis was adopted: "[C]odes were driven by both data per se and theories. Therefore, each unit of analysis allowed the participants to express themselves but also explicitly drew upon theoretical frameworks which strongly articulated that part of the data and best facilitated a close-up analysis of the phenomenon." (Xu & Zammit 2020: 8).

#### 4. Results

The analysis of our data suggests that collaborative reflexivity leads to positive change and professional growth in both teachers and researchers. The following discussion of results follows the structure illustrated in Figure 2. It first discusses teacher perspectives, followed by researchers' perspectives. The discussion is structured according to the themes that evolved in the process of data analysis.

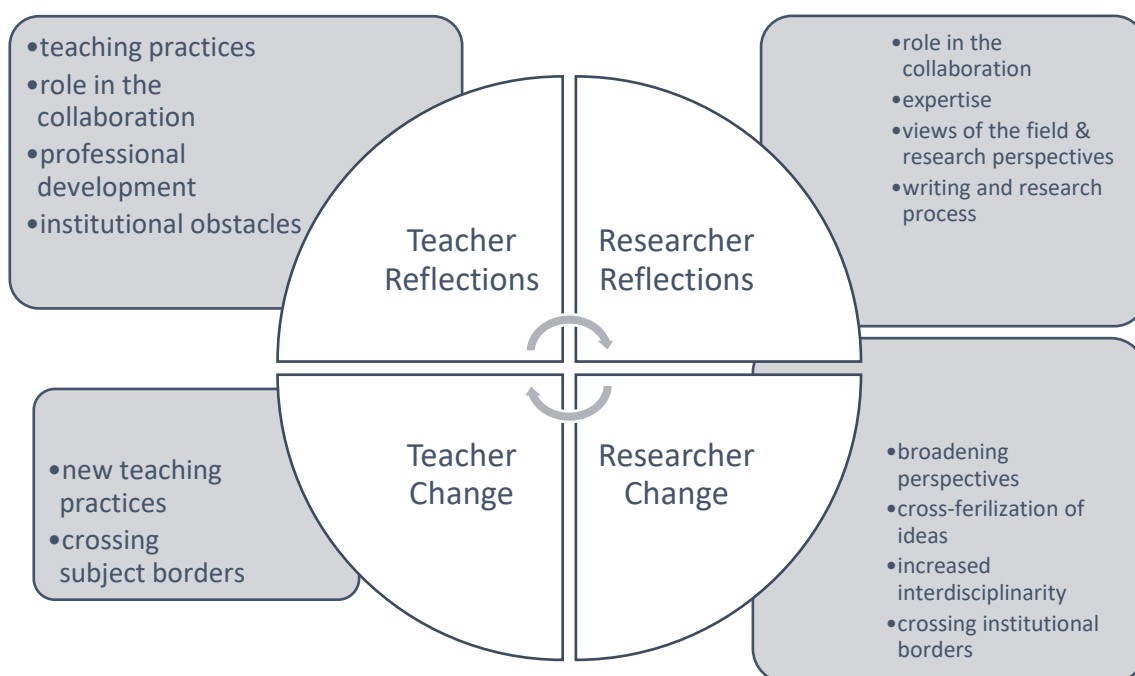


Fig. 2: Overview of themes



#### 4.1 Teacher reflections

Reflecting on their **role in the collaboration**, all three teachers stressed their status as subject specialists: "A different domain is its own little world" (Teacher 2), "I am a practical guy [...] I prefer doing Linux ☺" (Teacher 3), "my area of specialisation, digital entrepreneurship" (Teacher 1). This was the vantage point from which they viewed their role in the collaboration, which they all described in positive terms ("clearly structured", Teacher 1; "happy to support [the researchers]", Teacher 2; "exciting", Teacher 3). Two of them particularly highlighted the appreciation they felt on the part of the researchers: "They interacted with me as their research partner in a friendly, competent and appreciative manner" (Teacher 1), "What I really appreciate is your [the researchers'] trust in me" (Teacher 2).

Their comments revealed different levels of involvement. Teacher 1 positioned herself as needing support which she was grateful for receiving ("the language teachers [...] provide support to all teachers and students as needed") although she referred to herself as a 'research partner' (see above). Teacher 2, by contrast, stated that he was proud to be able to support one of the researchers in her research projects, which he saw as a sign of her appreciation for him as a colleague. He stated that he would not offer his support to an external researcher - "how should an outsider understand what's going on here with us" (Teacher 2). This showed that he saw both himself and the researcher as 'insiders' in their institution. Teacher 3 appeared to see himself as an active participant in the research process: "[the research project was] experienced live, co-created AND above all reflected together", which made him even more interested in it.

As for **reflections on their teaching practices**, Teacher 3 did not mention any instances of thinking about his teaching in any way. Another teacher (Teacher 2) claimed that he had no interest in thinking about his teaching (as opposed to the content of his lessons): "I am a practical guy and the technical content takes precedence for me"; "I do think about [teaching in English] but I push these thoughts aside as quickly as possible" (Teacher 2). He referred to a specific example from the research project which interested him but immediately explained that he did not apply it in his teaching ("the thing with the waves [i.e., semantic waves] was totally convincing, but I lack the time, the patience and the motivation to engage with it" (Teacher 2). Teacher 1 explained that her involvement in the research project had led her to "reconsider [her] didactic approaches" (Teacher 1).

When they reflected on their **professional development**, the impact of the research project was seen as positive by all three teachers. Teacher 3 provided a list of "personal learnings [sic]" that he attributed to his participation in the research project, including "a more general (holistic) perception" of his work. Teacher 1 felt that her involvement in the project had motivated her "to try

something completely new again and introduce changes" (Teacher 1), indicating an increased interest in professional growth. She specifically mentioned going to Finland for a teacher exchange. Teacher 2 described himself as having "a clear agenda that I follow when I teach" and implied that he saw no reason to change this but stated that he understood the value of collaboration in his teaching better thanks to the project: "By now, I have a few classes where I do team teaching" (Teacher 2).

While two of the teachers focused on the potential of the collaborative research project to have a positive impact on their institution ("Life is collaboration, collaboration, collaboration"; "Team Teaching settings", Teacher 3; "interaction and exchange between different groups, interaction and exchange between teachers", Teacher 1), Teacher 2 pointed out **institutional obstacles** to such projects. Most notably, he mentioned a lack of time and incentives to participate in projects: "Time is often a problem [...] there are no incentives, no feedback" (Teacher 2). In addition, he felt that his participation had no impact on how his competence was perceived within the institution.

#### *4.2 Teacher change*

Our results seem to indicate that the reflexivity which was encouraged by the research project was perceived by the teachers to have an **impact** (directly or indirectly) on their **teaching practices**. Teacher 1 reported: "In concrete terms [...] it made me [...] re-activate new (or somehow half-forgotten) things, such as Concept Mapping for exam preparation or as a final activity." Teacher 3 had added the practice of reflection to his repertoire for his teaching: "You should make the added value explicit for students (by talking about it and by reflecting together)". The practices of Teacher 2 had been impacted in a more indirect way: "[Teacher 3] made me see the effect this can have [...] I then applied this to my own teaching".

The data also seem to show that participation in the collaborative project led two of the teachers to look beyond the borders of their own subject. Teacher 1 explained that due to her participation in the project, she understood that "didactic approaches have to be different in a strongly technical subject" than in her own subject (digital entrepreneurship). Teacher 3 talked about the necessity of using "precise terminology and the corresponding explanations", showing an increased interest in the role of language in the teaching process. Teacher 3 also addressed the role of English in his teaching, but he insisted that in his subject content "is the focus, and I stress that in my classes". However, he mentioned team teaching, which presumably involved cooperating with the teacher of a different content subject.

#### *4.3 Researcher Reflections*

When analyzing data concerning the **role of the researchers** in the research cooperation, it became clear that joining different fields of expertise stemming

from work experience at different institutions would present a promising avenue of research, allowing the integration of insider knowledge. As Researcher 2 put it: "Our way of approaching research in ICLHE is unique as we bring inside and outside views [i.e., perspectives from different institutions] together. This makes it more acceptable for people working in ICLHE as the person involved is also part of their team" (Researcher 2).

Researcher 1 saw her role primarily as that of a facilitator and link between the institutions: "From the organizational point of view, I feel that I am the missing link between the university and the University of Applied Sciences." While Researcher 1 saw herself mainly in the role of creating innovative research ideas, she admits that the other researchers in the team also play an active role in coming up with suggestions for further research. Researcher 2 perceived herself mainly as the provider of theoretical background knowledge: "I would say my colleagues very often come up with new and innovative ideas which they develop during their teacher training seminars [...] I try to find a theoretical underpinning for them" (Researcher 2).

The interdisciplinary research cooperation involved different fields of **expertise** that needed to be aligned. The researchers managed to cross disciplinary borders, relying on the individual expertise of research partners, and began to see initial hurdles as opportunities: "We all had to overcome gaps in knowledge since we all have expertise in different fields. But [...] these challenges have almost disappeared and turned into opportunities to learn from each other" (Researcher 3). Working together enabled the researchers to broaden their research perspectives, to bundle their expertise and thus to cover a very broad field of research in their joint research projects. "We bring in expertise from the field of ELT, linguistics and teaching methodology [...] and thus cover a broad research area" (Researcher 1).

Cooperative reflexivity also led the researchers to change their own **views** about their fields, which in turn helped them to gain new insights: "Working in a professional research team, new insights, new approaches can be gained collaboratively [...] What I really appreciate is the interdisciplinary approach, seeing issues from different angles, discussing topics, pushing ideas forward, reflection, personal growth, fostering a growth mindset" (Researcher 2).

In addition to that, researchers mentioned that **the writing and research process** was positively influenced by shared expertise and common research endeavors, making the tiresome process of publishing and having to review articles more bearable: "I am very grateful that there are three of us here. It helps me a lot when we can laugh or scold reviewers' comments together. I have the feeling that this also helps me to deal better with criticism in my solo publications" (Researcher 1).

#### 4.4 *Researcher change*

The process of collaborative reflexivity significantly influenced the researchers as it helped them to broaden their perspectives. For example, Researcher 1 noted a shift in her view of language within ICLHE from an English Language Teaching (ELT) perspective (i.e., a focus on communicative competence) to a more linguistic one (i.e., a focus on the epistemic function of language): "We have to see language more in terms of linguistics than ELT" (Researcher 1). This form of collaboration also boosted her self-confidence, enhancing her professional development within a research team. This increase in self-confidence was also emphasized by Researcher 2: "I have gained more confidence because of our collaboration. I am more professional and enjoy working in a professional research team".

The third participant emphasized the positive changes she had seen in her teaching practice, influenced by her research colleagues who highlighted the importance of reflective practice: "I have changed my mind and some of my ideas about effective teaching methods and both colleagues have convinced me that reflective practice is an endeavour that is worthwhile" (Researcher 3).

This researcher also shifted her view on the value of small-scale studies, recognizing that such studies, while involving fewer subjects, still offer valuable insights: "Where I have most likely changed my mind is the value of small-scale studies. I used to be more impressed by large-scale studies (hundreds of subjects, statistical analysis...), but now I believe that smaller projects like ours also provide a great deal of knowledge and are not just a stopgap solution if you don't have the opportunity to conduct larger studies" (Researcher 3).

In terms of researcher change, one central theme that evolved in the data was the **cross-fertilization of ideas**. All researchers valued interdisciplinarity as an opportunity to learn from each other and acquire new types of knowledge. This is also shown in a statement by Researcher 3 who concluded that "challenges have [...] turned into opportunities to learn from each other". The content teachers mentioned learning about cognitive processes underlying language comprehension, the researcher referred to the implementation of new teaching methods and the language teacher improved their understanding of cognitive linguistics. The continuous exchange of ideas and perspectives has not only resulted in "a deeper understanding of teacher education and didactics", as noted by Researcher 3, but also highlighted the interdisciplinary benefits and professional growth arising from their collaborative efforts.

According to Researcher 3, the collective efforts of experts in ICLHE teaching, teacher training and applied linguistics are "living proof" of the benefits of **crossing institutional borders**. This synergy "enhanced the metalinguistic awareness of [ICLHE] teachers and redefined their role in the [ICLHE] classroom" (Researcher 3). They were able to implement didactic approaches

with a strong focus on language in their content teaching which also underscored "the quality of our joint research projects" (Researcher 1).

To sum up, the analysis of the retrospective reflective statements of both researchers and teachers point to a broadening of their perspectives and changes in their professional practices. These will be discussed in the following section.

## 5. Discussion

Our research cooperation was driven by the desire to better understand and ultimately improve teaching and research practices in the complex cross-disciplinary environment of ICLHE. Thus, the cooperation did not only aim to enrich the professional development of all participants, but could also be described as a continuous attempt to acquaint stakeholders with conceptual frameworks and to involve both teachers and program directors in identifying problems and triggering changes. The collaborative reflexivity that this approach entailed helped the participants to see the limitations of their own perspectives and expertise.

The results of the analysis of the retrospective reflective statements suggest that both teachers and researchers were open to cooperation and actively sought to contact and learn from each other, thus creating a new and effective CoP. In this CoP, all participants appreciated other perspectives, interests, ideas or ways of doing, and explored how these differed from their own. Joining individual experiential knowledge, various expertise, perspectives and interests was perceived to deliver better research results and positive change in teaching practices. One teacher in particular seems to have adopted the role of a 'Maverick' (Becker 1988), passing his innovative practices on to his colleagues.

It should be noted here that the positive results were understood to be due to the long-standing cooperation marked by a collegial atmosphere among the researchers. However, the findings also revealed another important aspect of successful collaboration, namely, that each researcher adhered to his or her specific role (see Table 1) within the CAR process. This is in line with Yosief (2024) who likewise highlight the importance of clearly defined roles in the collaboration.

As soon as disciplinary borders are crossed, researchers and teachers naturally see differences and maybe tensions between practices. The data show that this was not viewed as something to avoid at all costs in our study. Rather, participants embraced differences as a potential source of learning and change in line with Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) border crossing theory, which draws on Vygotsky and Cole's ideas that learning happens in social and cultural interactions inside and outside of academia and together with teachers and experts (Vygotsky & Cole 1978). Adopting this broader view, the reflective

approach taken in our CAR project goes beyond other active learning approaches such as problem-based learning or social constructivism in terms of participants' professional development (Craps et al. 2021). For example, the project has resulted in changes in the curriculum of the IT department as well as the establishment of regular staff meetings between content and language teachers to discuss teaching methodology.

Data also show that despite participants' overall positive attitude towards collaboration, they were faced with institutional hurdles, such as lack of time to engage with CAR and appreciation of research endeavors on the part of their superiors. This is also noted by Yosief et al. (2024: 213) as a challenging aspect of collaborative research: "A perturbing result of our CAR is the influence of institutional policy on our initiatives that challenged the space we created among us."

Another finding of the present study illustrates the dynamic and relational nature of collaboration which requires constant adaptations and leads to changes in behavior and views. As Solomon et al. (2001: 141) put it: "Collaboration is a dynamic process that has to be reinvented at each stage of development [...] It is also highly relational".

The participants perceived interpersonal relations as an important factor contributing to the success of the CAR project. Specifically, the creation of a space of trust (Kletzenbauer et al. 2022) was mentioned by the participants as a prerequisite for successful collaboration. Godínez Martínez (2022) likewise highlights that the effectiveness of collaborative action research largely depends on the quality of interaction between researchers and participants. Success is influenced by how well their beliefs and needs align, as well as their level of engagement in the process. The findings of the study were made possible because participants demonstrated key qualities such as willingness, adaptability, and openness to professional collaboration. These reflective practitioner traits played a crucial role in facilitating a productive and cooperative reflective practice.

The data show that high levels of commitment on the part of the researchers and teachers could be observed as a result of the CAR process, despite the fact that few support systems were in place. This corresponds to the first stage of Kezar's (2005) model, i.e., *building commitment* and convincing members to conduct collaborative work. The second stage, namely *commitment*, support and re-examination of common goals, requires continuous cycles of collaborative reflexivity. In order to reach the final stage, *sustaining*, structures and networks need to be established, and reward systems introduced. It is to be hoped that educational institutions realize the need for such support systems in the future.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of the study highlight the potential for transformative change in educational practices and professional development, underscoring the value of interdisciplinary work and collaborative and reflexive approaches. Particularly within an ICLHE setting, engagement in professional growth is becoming vital to foster sustainable CoPs based on mutual appreciation and trust. In this context, cycles of collaborative reflexivity do not only promise an enriched collaborative experience, but they may also cause change in terms of views and practices.

In line with Gilmore (2023) we therefore argue that universities should actively try to promote collaboration across institutions and disciplines, which would open up spaces for reflexivity. To achieve this, workload pressures need to be reduced, and positive research cultures fostered. Projects similar to the CAR project presented in this paper might then empower more teacher practitioners to engage in practitioner research. It is to be hoped that such collaborative and reflective research endeavors will result in innovative research and improved teaching practices, which ultimately also empower learners (see also Buğra & Wyatt 2021).

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