

# Language curriculum transformation and motivation through action research

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## Abstract

This article describes part of a larger action research study carried out in 2018 with secondary school learners and teachers of English in southern Argentina. The study was guided by two aims: (1) improving English language learner motivation, and (2) transforming the English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum through teacher and learner engagement. The project also sought to help teachers develop professionally and exercise their agency as curriculum makers and developers through the support of teacher research. The study involved the participation of 920 learners in the design and implementation of EFL lessons which responded to their beliefs, expectations, and experiences. Data were collected through a survey, group and individual interviews, reflective journals, and whole class discussions. Drawing on thematic analysis and descriptive statistics, findings also show that learners moved from demotivation to motivation as they noted that they could contribute to curriculum enactment and transformation through active participation in teachers' pedagogical decisions. Findings also reveal that the enactment of a context-responsive and bottom-up curriculum led to motivational synergy, and teachers' agency enhancement through collaborative lesson planning, materials development, and research engagement for professional development. However, teachers experienced lack of confidence regarding teacher-made materials.

Key words: language learning motivation; curriculum transformation; curriculum enactment; context; ELT; action research; motivation synergy

## Introduction

Ministries of education often release curriculum guidelines which establish and organise how teaching and learning processes should be approached by teachers. This curriculum becomes the intended/official curriculum, i.e. the content learners are expected to learn (Graves, 2008, 2016). Wedell and Grassick (2018) emphasise that official curricula in language teaching is often top-down and hierarchical. It is agreed that curriculum implementation largely rests on teachers' shoulders, and its success depends on teachers' ownership and knowledge of what the curriculum proposes (Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2014).

Language learning motivation and curriculum development are part of the formal education rhetoric as language teaching in formal contexts is organised around policies which, when following socioconstructivist perspectives as it is the case of the context of this study, may include learners' interests and needs. In language learning, motivation can be succinctly defined as a complex, dynamic, and relational construct which reflects the drives and intentions of learners to engage in language learning (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2014). Notwithstanding, the top-down nature of curriculum development may ignore classroom contexts (Soto, 2018) and include a set of assumptions incompatible with teachers and learners.

The literature is clear about the need to listen to learners (Coyle, 2013) and teachers (Shawer, 2010) to enhance motivation and transform the intended curriculum into context-responsive curriculum enactment (Graves, 2016). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of studies at the intersection of language learning motivation and bottom-up curriculum development carried out in contexts where English language teaching (ELT) is mandatory. It may be concurred that as a response to this reality, studies in language learning motivation and curriculum development should start to include more practice-based articles documented through teacher research (Ushioda, 2016).

As a response to this lacuna, the aim of this action-research-based study is to examine how an English-as-a-foreign-language curriculum was transformed through teacher and learner engagement to (1) improve language learner motivation, and (2) contribute to teachers' agency and professional development.

### **Conceptual framework**

In this section I discuss two key constructs: (1) language learning motivation, and (2) teacher engagement with the language curriculum.

### *A relational view of language learning motivation*

In language education, research on motivation has enjoyed a surging interest (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015) particularly from a socio-dynamic approach. Within this approach, of specific interest to this study is Ushioda's (2009) person-in context relational view of motivation which stresses the synergy and dynamics between identity, selves, and context that drive people to do something (Ushioda, 2009). In this line of research, language learning motivation is an unstable concept in constant dialogue with the context in which learners construct their possible selves and language learning identities (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei et al., 2014; Huang, Hsu, & Chen, 2015; Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Lamb, 2004; Piniel & Csizér, 2013; Ushioda, 2013; Xu & Gao, 2014) and regulate their L2 learning experiences (Kormos & Csizér, 2014) concomitantly with teachers' motivational strategies (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2008). In a review article, Norton (2016) adds that motivation and identity in language learning are related to investment, i.e., the effort that people are prepared to make in order to achieve their imagined identity and goals.

In a review article around the motivational dimension of language teaching, Lamb (2017) reasons that teachers and researchers should examine motivation in settings where English is a compulsory subject, and learners may be demotivated to learn it (e.g., Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Kikuchi, 2015; Taylor, 2013) despite teachers' discourse on its benefits. In such cases, Lamb argues that teachers may explore how to transform demotivation into motivation through action research. For example, in a study with Indonesian teenage learners, Lamb and Budiyanto (2013; see also Lamb, 2012) remark that in settings where English is distant from communities of L2 users, as in southern Argentina, teenagers find little engagement with English, and they assess it as another subject in the school system. Therefore, it becomes important to listen to their needs and wants to maximise motivation, investment, and

engagement. For example, in a study of Romanian teenagers' motivation to learn English, Taylor (2013) observed that the participating teenagers "were asking to be listened to, taken into account, included in their own education; to be treated like real people, who would love to bring their own real world into the language classroom and take the language out of the classroom into the real world". (p. 53).

Learners' voices could be ingrained in the language curriculum provided that the curriculum is the result of bottom-up, participatory initiatives in which learners and teachers have a say and have the agency to transform it for contextual alignment. Such participatory projects may be fertile ground for motivational synergy between teachers and learners where one's (de)motivation may affect others (Henry & Thorsten, 2018; Pinner, 2019).

#### *Language teachers' engagement with curriculum change*

A curriculum, as a socio-political organiser, communicates the principles and features of an educational endeavour designed in such a way that it remains open to discussion and can be transposed to practice (Stenhouse, 1975). Young (2014) suggests that a curriculum is a structure that constraints the activities of teachers and learners; however, curricula "make some things possible to learn that most of us would find impossible to learn without them; at the same time they set limits on what is possible to learn in schools or other educational institutions" (p. 8). Such an organiser may be addressed either as a text or the totality of formal education (Terigi, 1999). Whichever view, a curriculum is the synthesis of values, social practices, beliefs, and negotiations with educators but usually in the hands of experts particularly at the level of curriculum writing, what has been called a specialist approach to curriculum, one which determines "what students will learn [...] and how they will learn it" (Graves, 2016, p. 79).

The distance between what the expected/intended/official curriculum, i.e. what is in print, and the observed or received curriculum, i.e. what happens in a classroom, reveals that a curriculum is a complex and dynamic system actualised to accommodate to a specific context (Graves, 2008). According to Bascia, Carr-Harris, Fine-Meyer and Zurzolo (2014; see also Alvunger, 2018), when teachers extend their agency to policy making, teacher-driven curriculum innovation becomes a process of professional development and individual, social, and political evolution. However, studies on teacher cognition and engagement in curriculum development show that when teachers are seriously engaged in curriculum development, they may need support in enhancing subject-matter knowledge, teaching strategies, and curriculum design expertise (Huizinga et al., 2014; Soto, 2018; Voogt, Pieters, & Handelzalts, 2016) to secure ownership and professional development.

With teachers' engagement, a curriculum ceases to be a product and becomes an in-context decision making process which responds to the environment. According to Nation and Macalister (2010), a curriculum is influenced by three factors: learners, teachers, and the situation, i.e. the local context. In this regard, the term *enacted curriculum* (Graves, 2008) captures (1) the realities of a curriculum in practice, actors' agency, (2) highlights that context is such a central element of curriculum development that the enacted curriculum is always local and therefore unique in its interpretation and appropriation, and (3) contributes to the constructing of participatory knowledge democracies when it is guided by action research (Wood, McAteer, & Whitehead, 2019).

In the field of English language teaching, recent studies have examined curriculum change through teachers' engagement. For example, in a qualitative study carried out with ten EFL teachers which examined how they approached the curriculum in their classroom, Shaver (2010) found that teachers approached it as curriculum developers, curriculum-makers, or curriculum-transmitters. Those who were classified as curriculum developers or makers would

adapt the EFL curriculum at the level of content, pedagogies, or tasks to fit their teaching context.

While studies reveal a tendency to approach curriculum development and change through teachers, other studies show the inclusion of learners. In the context of an English as a foreign language (EFL) programme for graduates at an Israeli university, Elisha-Primo et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study which examined students' (N=469) perceptions and attitudes towards English language learning as part of a larger needs analysis project for EFL curriculum renewal. While this study proceeds from the premise that engaging students in curriculum evaluation for its change may increase their motivation and learning experience, the study did not include teachers' or the mechanics of incorporating students' feedback into actual curriculum enactment.

Against this backdrop, two questions guided this study based on a technical view of action research:

1. Does including learners' voices in EFL teaching contribute to their motivation enhancement?
2. Does teacher engagement in curriculum development contribute to teacher professional development?

## **Methods**

This investigation adopted a technical view of action research (AR). In AR, an issue receives careful examination to intervene with the aim of transforming a given situation paying special attention to context (Authors, forthcoming; Whitehead, 2019). Technical action research refers to experiences from joint projects between schools and universities where the former ask for

guidance to solve an issue (Cain & Harris, 2013). In this technical-AR-based study, a group of teachers approached the author and received support as they did not have research experience.

This study was triggered by 12 secondary EFL teachers from state secondary schools in southern Argentina. According to an internal report from the Secondary Education Superintendency in Esquel, English was together with Mathematics the subjects that most secondary school learners failed or found to be most difficult. The report indicated that in the case of English the most prevailing reason argued by learners was demotivation caused by decontextualised topics, unbalanced coverage of oral and written skills, and heavy grammar-based teaching. The report impacted on local teachers' sense of self-efficacy and, at their request, we arranged a meeting. I participated in this process in my capacity as teacher educator at an initial English language teacher education programme and as part of the ELT Team from the Ministry of Education in Chubut. In the first meeting the teachers raised concerns about the need for professional support to investigate the reasons behind this negative picture and felt that the official curriculum did not respond to their teaching contexts and thus was responsible for learner demotivation and low performance. In Chubut (Argentina), English is a mandatory subject during the six years of secondary education and it is allotted three 40-minute periods a week. The intended/official curriculum for English sets out general goals anchored in sociocultural theory and includes suggestions for teaching and assessment following principles from three approaches: communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) from a language-driven perspective.

As a response to the teachers' concerns, I suggested the design and implementation of a professional development course which gave them tools to investigate their practices through AR. They accepted the proposal and the course ran from March until August in 2018. The course followed these premises: (1) teachers who are supported in research engagement are better equipped to develop professionally and enhance learner motivation and performance (Al-

Maamari & Al-Aamari, 2017; Carvajal Tapia, 2017; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2018; Hanks, 2017; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Yuan, Sun, & Teng, 2017), and (2) learners need to be heard (Coyle, 2013; Elisha-Primo et al., 2010) to transform the intended curriculum into context-responsive curriculum enactment (Graves, 2016), and (3) collaboration among teachers, learners, and curriculum developers will make ELT meaningful and relevant. Upon agreement with teachers and school heads, the course was designed to increase learner motivation, improve their learning of English, and provide teachers with opportunities for teacher development through reflection and research. It was not mandatory for teachers to enrol in the course. During the course it was understood that the intersection between language learning motivation and teachers' curriculum agency (Alvunger, 2018) needed to be examined in order to transform teachers' professional practices and, ultimately, the EFL curriculum.

#### *Technical AR in context*

While Author acted as a facilitator and delivered initial sessions on curriculum development and AR (e.g. how to organise a project and how to collect and analyse data), the teachers, with Author's support, designed their own AR projects and lessons depending on their specific contexts. As the teachers realised that they shared identical concerns, we developed the same data collection instruments, but the lessons aimed at action/intervention were individually designed and collectively discussed before and after implementation. In this project, AR became a catalyst to synthesise pedagogical, research, and professional development concerns and opportunities for bottom-up curriculum transformation. Although the the bottom-up nature underpinning the whole experience was central, my dilemma as a researcher was how to secure success without imposing my ideas so that teacher agency and empowerment could be central. During the course/AR implementation, while I sought to let the teachers find the answers for

themselves through personal explorations, they demanded my explicit intervention/explanations given my ministerial role and experience.

The project had originally included two AR cycles. Nevertheless, only Cycle 1 (Table 1) was implemented; Cycle 2 was stopped in August for political and ministerial reasons. In this study, I concentrate on Cycle 1 as it was the one fully completed. Written consent was obtained from the participating teachers, the learners and their parents and ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and learners' and teachers' right to leave the project without any consequences on their grades or teaching post were discussed as the study progressed. We also discussed learners' levels of participation and agency and the unequal distribution of power between teachers and learners in order to be realistic about the project outcomes.

**Table 1. AR dynamics. PLACE HERE**

### *Participants*

In 2018, there were 3,181 secondary schools learners in the eight secondary schools in Esquel. From that population, 1,500 (47.15 %) completed a teacher-developed survey. From the 62 classes surveyed by the teachers, 30 classes were included in the AR project due to limited human resources, time constraints and teacher strikes in 2018. The 12 participating teachers selected those classes which posed major teaching challenges. Following the principle of purposive sampling (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), two learners from each of the 30 classes were interviewed as representatives of each class and teacher involved. Drawing on exams the teachers had implemented prior to this experience and teachers' own judgement, each selected a learner who had passing marks in and a positive attitude towards English and a learner who had non-passing marks and had shown demotivated attitudes in class.

The participating teachers were 12. Concerning qualifications, one teacher held a degree as a translator, ten held an EFL teaching degree, and one had no formal teaching qualifications but had completed short courses on ELT didactics and general pedagogy. In terms of years of teaching experience, the mean was 15, where at one end one teacher had 18 years of experience, and at the other end, two teachers had four years.

### *Instruments*

Instruments included tools and activities which responded to the regular teaching practices of those involved:

- Student survey: the Spanish-medium survey contained 18 items (Table 2) and was piloted with two randomly selected classes from two of the teachers, and then implemented in March 2018 by the 12 participating teachers. The teachers did not collect reliability and normality indices due to lack of research knowledge and views on quantitative research. They limited the pilot study to examining whether the items were clear to the learners.
- Student interview: Following purposeful sampling, two learners from each of the 30 classes involved participated in a 40-minute interview which took place at the schools and conducted in Spanish by the participating teachers, and by Author as requested by four teachers. The interviews were audiorecorded with a mobile phone and orthographically transcribed. Learners were asked to elaborate on their survey answers and comment on learning and teaching styles.
- Whole group/class discussions: There were four whole group discussions with the participating teachers led by Author, and 60 whole class discussions (two for each class involved) led by the participating teacher; on 14 of such discussions Author participated. Discussions centred on the impact of the changes to the teaching and

learning processes, and were audiorecorded, transcribed, and analysed by a participating teacher and Author.

- Reflective journals: Both Author and each of the participating teachers kept a journal in which they recorded their perceptions, experiences, concerns, and aspects of collaborative lesson plan development.
- Individual interviews with teachers: Each teacher was interviewed once, with the interview lasting approximately 30-40 minutes. They were carried out in Spanish by Author and teachers were asked to reflect on the intended/official curriculum, the lessons implemented, and their perceptions. Interviews were audiorecorded and orthographically transcribed.

#### *Data analysis*

Data analysis included quantitative and qualitative methods (Brown, 2014) framed in AR. Each participating teacher analysed the surveys from her classes through descriptive statistics, and the results were uploaded on a shared Excel file on Google Drive with the aim of detecting commonalities and trends across classes and teachers.

Conceived as an iterative and inductive process, thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Saldaña, 2016) was employed for understanding the data collected through interviews, discussions, and journals; notwithstanding, each data set was treated individually to examine the process in its sociohistorical context. While the teachers and Author discussed the initial categories which were first organised into axial codes and later into unifying themes for analysing whole class discussions and interviews with the learners, individual interviews with each participating teacher were only analysed by Author. Notwithstanding, a colleague alien to the project acted as a second analyst of 40% of the data collected. There was an 80% of

agreement; discrepancies between coders were solved through revisiting the data and codes until 100% analysis agreement was reached.

## **Findings**

This section is organised following the AR stages described in Table 1 to highlight the processual nature of the experience.

### *Issue identification: Learners' dissatisfaction with the enacted curriculum*

The survey collected data about learners' (N= 1,500) wants and reasons for learning English (Table 2). The survey contained a four-point Likert scale to show (dis)agreement with each statement. For analytical and pedagogical purposes the teachers collapsed the scales into a positive or a negative attitude towards each item.

#### **Table 2. Survey results.**

Only three survey items received different agreement rates according to age. Item 1 was stronger among the youngest population across schools. Items 3 and 5 were received with less enthusiasm as the learners were older. Those who included examples for Item 3, expressed: Argentinian history (N=26), citizenship education (N=21), human biology (N= 13), and mathematics (N= 4). Conversely, those who included examples of possible topics for Item 5 referred to: gender issues (N= 35), racism and discrimination (N= 31), and wars (N= 13).

From the student population surveyed, 60 learners were interviewed. They were asked to assess their EFL experiences in secondary education and elaborate on their answers to the survey and the results of their classes. Table 3 summarises the analytical categories/themes (represented in statements) and their frequency. It was noted that there were no differences regarding age, school, or teacher.

**Table 3. Learners' perceptions on studying EFL.**

Such results are coherent with the overall survey findings and support learners' interest in having EFL lessons concentrated on speaking, vocabulary, and authentic materials which could reduce the perception of EFL lessons as decontextualised, childish, or coursebook-driven. The themes signal the sources of demotivation among learners and the apparent tension between the intended/official curriculum and the enacted curriculum as experienced by the learners. According to learners' experiences, the official curriculum was not context-responsive and did not promote meaningful interaction. However, the official curriculum suggests the use of coursebooks as tools, or a balanced approach for oral and written skills, together with a focus on formative and instrumental aims in the teaching of English.

*Issue identification: Teachers' negative views of the official curriculum*

The two discussions with the 12 teachers centred on the survey and interview results with their learners. Three themes emerged: (1) little awareness of the official curriculum, (2) learners' lack of commitment, and (3) lack of institutional agreements.

In the first discussion, the official EFL curriculum in Chubut was analysed. It was striking to note that only six of the teachers had thoroughly read the curriculum, while the rest had only read the content and the section on teaching approaches. It also surfaced that the

syllabi the teachers had designed for their classes were based on general English coursebooks and did not adhere to the rationale underpinning the official curriculum. Such a situation revealed the first dissonance between the official curriculum and the enacted curriculum. When asked about their disregard for the official curriculum, the teachers agreed on having negative views on it. For example, one teacher expressed:

It doesn't take into account our context. It's too ideal and there is no guidance on how to deal with social problems that affect our daily job. I haven't read it all but I don't to waste my time on something that it's not really meant to help teachers.

(Claudia, Extract 1)

Extract 1 reveals the a priori negative views on the curriculum and the strength of teachers' conceptions on what a curriculum should include.

When analysing the learners' responses to the survey and interview, all teachers concurred that the learners demanded something they were not ready to commit to. The following extract illustrates the overall perception:

OK, so they say they want more speaking, and more vocab, and more this and that but then don't bother, they don't participate, they don't do the homework. You ask them what they're interested in and they say nothing. I feel they want to be entertained and have fun. They ask but they don't give. (Marisa, E2)

Extract 2 signals teachers' perception of learners' lack of investment in language learning. Nevertheless, these teachers were prepared to invest in their professional identity and

determined to plan a course of action collaboratively despite lack of agreement among colleagues.

Last, teachers explained that some of the discrepancies in teaching practices and limited progress among learners were due to lack of agreements among teachers. As one teacher put it,

There's no progress because every year the students do the same. We [all teachers] have agreements at the beginning of the year, but then some teachers do whatever they like, and then they choose textbooks at their own discretion, and then we [those teachers who did observe the agreements] don't even know what books the students actually use. (Cecilia, E3)

This comment also exposes another tension between the official curriculum and the enacted curriculum since the official curriculum does encourage teachers to reach institutional agreements and necessary adaptations to the official curriculum because it is teachers, as agents of change, who can turn the official curriculum into a context-responsive curriculum and syllabus in the schools where they work.

In light of learners' and teachers' perceptions, the issue identification stage allowed to understand learners and teachers in their context in order to build (1) a person in context relational view of motivation (Ushioda, 2009), and (2) agency through collaboration triggered by listening to learners and teachers. This was possible by means of an AR project contextually situated and focused on specific groups of teachers and learners.

*Action and Intervention: An opportunity for curriculum transformation*

The action stage entailed the collaborative design of lesson plans for the classes selected by the teachers. Author offered feedback on their lesson plans and ideas for materials development. Lesson plans included aims, content, materials, and activities which responded to the learners' survey and interview results. Analysis of the teachers' journal entries yielded the following categories: (1) topic selection as challenging, (2) teacher-produced materials as a challenge, (3) opportunity to personalise the curriculum.

Topic selection became a challenge because teachers found it difficult to construct language aims around topics, authentic materials, and a balanced approach to language skills. As a response to learners' suggestions, lessons tended to be developed around topics such as gender-based violence, feminism, abortion, jobs and professions, information and technology, climate and other geographical features in Patagonia, mining in Patagonia, and Argentinian economy. It should be noted that around such topics the teachers often revised grammatical structures and introduced new vocabulary. On few occasions did the teachers use such topics to introduce new language. On this feature, a teacher wrote:

The topic is fantastic but how on earth do I plan a lesson from scratch to offer them something new and practise oral skills and vocab? I first of thinking of the language I need to teach according to my syllabus and then the topics, but it should be the other way around, or both? I'm getting confused and stuck! (Emilia, E4)

The extract above is concomitant with the third theme. While the nature of materials and activities was not imposed on teachers, the teachers agreed that the materials had to be authentic and respond to learners' wants and needs. This entailed that the teachers had to produce their own materials. Such a decision proved to be demanding because collecting and selecting sources of input such as texts, visuals, or videos became time consuming. In addition,

it was challenging because such sources were expected to match learners' English proficiency and age and have pedagogical potential. On this challenge, a teacher wrote in her journal:

I found this wonderful video and text but then I realised that all my activities were questions to check comprehension, but it was difficult for me to do a vocabulary activity or an activity to introduce a new grammatical item. (Jesica, E5)

Although teacher-made materials became an obstacle and increased teacher's workload, it was felt that developing lessons plans aligned to learners' voices was an opportunity to transform the official curriculum to represent the contextual demands, teachers' concerns and strategies, and learners' interests and sources of motivation.

The intervention stage comprised around 5-8 lessons based on the lesson plans designed and taught by each teacher in the classes they selected for this project. Teachers continued writing on their journals and used their entries for the individual interviews and whole group discussion.

#### *Evaluation: Teachers' challenges and opportunities*

Data were collected through one individual interview with each teacher and a whole group discussion which served as a space for sharing the emerging and constant themes in the journals. In this regard, the journals triangulated the interview findings from a confirmability perspective as the teachers reiterated the same challenges. From the data sources employed the following themes emerged: (1) reasons for currents of (de)motivation, (2) lack of confidence, (3) opportunities for context-responsive teaching, (4) enacting a doable curriculum as a possibility through AR.

The teachers experienced currents of (de)motivation, i.e., times of frustration particularly at the beginning of the intervention stage due to lack of confidence for topic selection and materials development, and when lesson aims were not fully met. Notwithstanding, the teachers experienced times of self-efficacy and motivation when the teachers noticed that the learners showed interest and paid attention in class even if their performance was still limited. A teacher expressed:

What a disaster! I did what they wanted, but they hadn't brought the pictures. So I had Plan B, but they were all like sleepy, and only a few bothered. At some point I got a bit upset and said to them 'Next class we'll continue with that boring coursebook we're using'. Imagine! The coursebook became a punishment! The following lesson they seemed more enthusiastic or at least responded, and perhaps I've got to be more patient and less anxious and see the results in the long run. (Clara, E6)

Clara's words represent a general feeling among the teachers: they wished to see the changes immediately. In this sense, their anxiety appeared to be their source of demotivation, but that would transform into motivation when they noticed minor attitudinal changes in the learners.

Although the general self-evaluation from the teachers was positive, teachers assessed themselves as not confident enough for an approach to teaching in which the learners had an active role in lesson design and implementation. Teachers voiced concerns around their being unable to produce quality materials or find a balance between a focus on language work and a focus on topics. Their lack of confidence pushed them to think of coursebook-driven lessons as a better option. As one teacher put it,

I miss the coursebook. The coursebook provides us with guidance and a structure. I don't think I've got the right training, or the time, to developing lessons which get

closer to the students. Perhaps we can do something like this once a month and then continue with the usual way of teaching. Or do more project work. (Emilia, E7)

Emilia's words reveal the complex landscape of teaching. On the one hand, they assessed themselves as lacking professional knowledge; however, their lessons improved on aspects such as balanced skills, variety, and a focus on context according to their comments and learners' views (see Table 5). Nevertheless, their lack of confidence was associated with their workload and lack of time to engage in professional practices beyond a coursebook. This perception highlights their professional tensions since they also indicated that the project allowed them to engage in context-responsive teaching, teacher research for their own benefit, and enact a doable curriculum with different degrees of success depending on teachers' individual characteristics.

Albeit challenging, teachers envisaged the AR project as an opportunity for professional development and innovation through context-responsive teaching. Teachers became reflective about the centrality of the teaching context and its impact on their teaching strategies and lesson plans. In a whole group discussion, a teacher reflected:

It's not been easy, but this has meant a lot. I've now pay more attention to context, the real one, I mean the students and their lives as teenagers. We all say context is important, but now context means something else, something deeper, it means the context of my teaching, my students, not what I imagine when I plan, but their faces when I enter the classroom. And thanks to the research we've done together, context means something deep to me, and that impacts in the way I teach. (Jesica, E8)

The emergence of context-responsive teaching as a potent category that promoted motivation and investment in both teachers and learners together with comments on the tensions between the official curriculum and their situated practices drove teachers to revisit/read the official curriculum and reflect on the AR project. The comparisons between their daily teaching with context-responsive teaching generated reflections around the different types of curriculum which may coexist and their impact on motivation and investment. One teacher said:

The curriculum is too broad, but it makes sense because it's for a whole province. So here we're, I think, I don't know, working on something doable guided by research we have done ourselves. Like here's the curriculum, and here's what I can do with the curriculum thanks to collaborative research, and it's not easy, but it's what I can do at my school, with my students. When I see the students participating and devoting time to doing the homework, I feel energised because the curriculum is ours and I want to work more for it. (Antonia, E9)

What has been termed *doable curriculum* represents the enacted curriculum, i.e., what teachers and learners in collaboration create in their context and how the teaching and learning processes are organised according to their selves, interest, and possibilities.

*Evaluation: Increase in learners' views and performance*

The teachers carried out 60 whole class discussions with their classes, two discussions per each of the 30 classes involved, to hear learners' views on their own learning experiences. Thematic analysis yielded the themes condensed in Table 4.

#### Table 4. Learners' views.

The most recurrent themes show positive and negative aspects of the intervention stage. On the one hand, there was a tendency to value the lesson topics, vocabulary learning opportunities, materials, and group work as positive. It is important to highlight that because of the less coursebook-driven approach adopted during the intervention stage, teachers were perceived as creative since they developed their own materials. Drawing on learners' views, motivation, particularly in synergy between learners and teachers, surfaced as a unifying theme, particularly among the younger learners:

I pay more attention now. Maybe I don't participate a lot. But I listen, I complete all the activities. I like it now because it's not book, book, book all the time, and there's more we can do in groups. And the teacher is more dynamic, more interested in us learning. (Morena, E10)

Conversely, the learners suggested that the teachers should use more Spanish as a scaffolding tool to understand vocabulary or general ideas from a video or a reading text. In relation to reading, they assessed the reading activities as weak as they were only based on questions. One important emerging theme was that English was perceived as "too foreign" and therefore many learners were demotivated to learn it even when they recognised that the lessons had changed and had become more participatory and engaging given the inclusion of topics they had suggested. One illustrative comment was:

The teacher has changed a lot. She pays more attention to us. But I don't need English. I'm not going to study, I live in a tiny house with no heating, I have to work to

help my mother. I don't care about learning English because that's not important where I live. (Pablo, E11)

On the one hand, engagement in learning improved as a result of learner motivation enhancement and investment in a context where English was mandatory and where learners did not fully feel identified with English (Lamb & Budiyo, 2013; Norton, 2016). Yet, their motivation prompted to see themselves as capable learners despite contextual and broader challenges. On the relationship between motivation and investment, a learner said:

I know now that if I want, I can. If I want to pay attention I can learn. And when I work in class I see that I can learn. And I tell myself, this is my only opportunity to learn English and I can't miss it. So I tell myself that I have to pay attention and devote more time to it because then I see that I can listen and understand, or read something on Instagram and understand what it says. (Mateo, E12).

## **Discussion**

### *Learner engagement in curriculum change and motivation*

The first research question sought to understand whether including learners' voices in EFL teaching contributed to their motivation enhancement.

In line with the literature (Lamb, 2017, Pinner, 2019; Taylor, 2013) learners slowly moved from demotivation (Table 3) to motivation (Table 4) as a result of exercising their agency. In this project learners had a say in curriculum enactment and overall transformation (Table 4). This was possible because the teachers considered their suggestions (E10) and built the enacted curriculum around them together with their own informed decisions.

Furthermore, learners' attitudinal changes reveal that, following studies on teacher-learner motivation (Henry & Thorsten, 2018; Pinner, 2019), demotivated learners lead to demotivated teachers who experience frustration for being unable to develop a stimulating learning environment. Consequently, curriculum renewal needs to incorporate learners' perceptions (Elisha-Primo et al., 2010) and wants in a democratic manner, and these need to be negotiated with teachers so that their own beliefs are also considered (E7, E8). When curriculum transformations are perceived and welcomed by learners, their attitudes to language learning and classroom dynamics change and impact positively in their motivation and investment (E12). Thus motivation enhancement can be experienced by learners and teachers in synergy.

In this experience, curriculum transformation as a democratic undertaking resulted in transforming initial teacher-learner demotivation (E2, E3) into teacher-learner motivation (E9, E10). This change could be interpreted under the concepts of motivational synergy (Pinner, 2019) and investment (Norton, 2016) since teachers' efforts around topic selection and materials development based on learners' contributions enhanced learner motivation and investment, which, in turn, improved teacher motivation despite contextual challenges and periods of frustration. Motivational synergy signals that engaging teachers and learners in context-responsive curriculum transformation becomes a meaningful experience located at the intersection of both learners' and teachers' identities and trajectories (Ushioda, 2009). Teachers and learners can collaboratively create their own curriculum aligned with learners' and teachers' realities outside the classroom setting.

#### *Teachers' professional development through AR-guided curriculum development*

The second research question sought to examine whether teacher engagement in curriculum development contributes to teacher professional development.

Initially, teachers seemed to be interested (E1) in a technical curriculum, a detailed description which would allow them to apply a specific ELT method in their classrooms, thus reducing themselves to curriculum implementers or transmitters (Shawer, 2010). Teachers' usual identity as curriculum implementers and lack of knowledge about curriculum and research transformed the AR project into a technical view of AR where Author assumed a more leading role than originally planned. Nevertheless, this was in contradiction with their motivations to join this project.

Following Young (2014), as the project developed, the teachers moved from viewing themselves as curriculum implementers and the curriculum as an obstacle to regarding it as a guide which they could adapt and reframe to meet the demands of their own context (E9). Through AR, teachers' reflections on the dialogue between the official and the enacted curriculum prompted them to transform the curriculum and appropriate it at personal and contextual levels since curriculum enactment became an opportunity to incorporate teachers and learners' voices. Teachers and learners thus became context-responsive curriculum developers (Shawer, 2010) and critical implementers in their own right guided by the results of the AR project (Graves, 2008; Bascia et al., 2014; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

In sum, teachers' engagement in curriculum development contributed to their professional development and motivation (E6, E8, E9). Despite teachers' dependence, the project served as a platform for enhancing teacher autonomy and agency as they personally and collectively experienced the benefits of assuming an active and more reflective participation in curriculum enactment, specifically materialised in lesson planning and teacher-made teaching resources (E4, E5). Furthermore, the project provided them with teacher research tools they may utilise in their professional practices.

Overall, the teachers benefitted from engaging in teacher research not only for their professional development in reflecting and examining their practices but also for, as discussed

above, improving learner motivation and investment (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2018; Hanks, 2017; Norton, 2016). Since teachers may feel lack of confidence and go through periods of demotivation when engaging in AR-driven curriculum transformation, this study shows that supporting teachers doing AR offers positive results when the issues to be examined are rooted in the revitalisation of teachers' contexts and agency (Alvunger, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that engaging teachers and learners in curriculum transformation improved not only language learner motivation but also teacher motivation, and contributed to teachers' agency and professional development. However, the study had its limitations: (1) only one cycle was possible due to a prolonged teacher strike and therefore sustainability and long-term effects could be questioned; (2) only 12 teachers were involved, and (3) the study did not include sophisticated statistical methods given the teachers' disinterest in quantitative analysis.

It is hoped that this article be regarded as a fair response to Ushioda's (2016) call for teacher research on language learning motivation. In this line, future studies could consider a longitudinal approach and examine how curriculum transformations can be sustained throughout secondary education in cases where EFL is a mandatory subject. Future investigations should analyse the relationship between motivation, English language proficiency, and teacher' sense of self-efficacy in bottom-up curriculum endeavours.

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**Table 1. AR dynamics.**

CYCLE	STAGES	PARTICIPANTS	DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS
March	Issue identification	1,500 secondary school learners. From this universe 60 learners (two from each class) were interviewed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student survey.</li> <li>• Student interviews.</li> </ul>
		12 teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole group discussions</li> </ul>
April-June	Action and Intervention	12 teachers and Author	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers' reflective journals.</li> </ul>
July - August	Evaluation	920 secondary school learners from 30 classes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual interviews with teachers.</li> <li>• Whole teacher group discussion</li> <li>• Teachers' reflective journals.</li> <li>• Whole class discussion.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Survey results.**

<b>At school, I'd like to learn English...</b>	<b>% Positive attitude</b>
1. Through songs.	62
2. Through authentic material.	72.6
3. Through topics related to other school subjects. (include examples)	52.6
4. With a focus on speaking.	70
5. Through current topics in Argentina and the world. (include examples)	58.6
6. To get a job.	82
7. To understand what I find online.	86
8. To study in higher education.	86.6
9. To participate in social networks and groups.	63.3
10. To travel.	80.6
11. Because I like languages.	68
12. With a focus on writing.	74
13. With a focus on listening.	76.6
14. With a focus on reading.	70.6
15. With a focus on grammar.	69.3
16. With a focus on vocabulary.	84.6
17. Without a coursebook.	51.3
18. Using a coursebook only.	42

**Table 3. Learners' perceptions on studying EFL.**

Theme <i>Learning English is...</i>	Frequency (N= 60)
...boring because it is disjointed from our reality.	58
...not useful for our plans and interests.	51
...too much focused on grammar.	51
...poor on vocabulary.	51
...poor on speaking.	50
...childish.	37
...too coursebook-driven.	35

**Table 4. Learners' views.**

Theme	Frequency (N= 920)
Motivating topics.	834
Teachers as more creative.	810
Motivation from vocabulary.	800
Group work as an asset for collaborative learning.	754
Need to include more Spanish.	701
Videos as stimulating.	650
Reading activities as monotonous.	600
English as "too foreign".	517