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# Opening up 'spaces for manoeuvre': English teacher perspectives on learner motivation

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# Opening up 'spaces for manoeuvre': English teacher perspectives on learner motivation

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This qualitative study explores teachers' perspectives on learner motivation for English in Chilean secondary schools. Drawing both on motivation theories and on concepts related to teacher cognition, autonomy and agency, the analysis of 19 semi-structured interviews with Chilean English teachers sheds light on the difficulties that many teachers have in motivating their students so that they engage in classroom activities and learning. Findings show that teachers with a developed sense of agency report higher levels of learner motivation. Salient features of their accounts are classroom practices that grant students immediate positive experiences while learning English, rather than referring to future benefits. Other features are autonomous learning tasks, and a context-appropriate, empowering selection of cultural contents. The discussion suggests that teachers need to develop a sound sense of agency to identify 'spaces to manoeuvre' between external constraints, such as curricular policies or lack of parental support, and possible internal constraints, such as paralysing beliefs about their own competence or a limited cultural repertoire to draw on in order to make English lessons motivating and meaningful for their students. For improved learner motivation and meaningful learning, research needs to support teachers' autonomy in times of increasing curricular regulation and standardisation of knowledge.

**Keywords:** learner motivation; teacher agency; English language teaching; motivational strategies; Chile

## Introduction

Learner motivation is a crucial factor for meaningful learning and eventual success in any educational endeavour. Although motivation has sometimes been explored as an individual 'learner variable' inherent to the learner (e.g. Ushioda 2008), dynamic models of motivation place emphasis on the teacher actions that can influence learner motivation, both positively and negatively (e.g. Dörnyei and Ottó 1998). This perspective has given rise to an increasing number of publications that can help teachers develop 'motivational strategies' (e.g. Dörnyei 2001a), especially when it comes to 'teaching those that don't want to learn' (Vaello Orts 2007). However, if and how teachers put motivational strategies into action depends on their own beliefs about motivation and their perceptions of the context in which they work. These teacher perspectives on their students' motivation and subsequent influences

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on their pedagogical decision-making constitute an area that is still relatively unexplored in educational research.

Drawing on conceptual frameworks related to teacher autonomy and agency, this article examines the accounts of English teachers working in Chilean secondary schools and focuses on their struggles and successes in the classroom, especially in relation to their methodological choices and selection of learning materials. The analysis will offer valuable insights into the ways in which teachers' beliefs about their own competences, and interpretation of contextual possibilities and constraints lead them towards a more or less successful use of motivational strategies.[1]

In foreign language learning research, previous explorations of learner motivation have focused on the students' perspective. Those studies have shown the important role teachers play in the initial creation and maintenance of learner motivation (e.g. Chambers 1993; Trang and Baldauf 2007). The more recent research findings on motivational strategies often include the teachers' perspective (e.g. Cheng and Dörnyei 2007; Dörnyei and Csizer 1998) or combine classroom observations with the study of students' reactions to teachers' use of strategies (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei 2008). However, such studies are quantitative in nature and rely on questionnaires with rating scales to gauge the use and effectiveness of certain strategies. Although these studies provide valuable evidence of the existence and effectiveness of motivational strategies, they do not explain why some teachers will use some of these strategies and others will not, or why they might use them in one context and not in another. Also, as the questionnaires are based on ready-made lists of strategies, they do not allow for the inclusion of teachers' 'own' strategies, such as they would mention if asked open-ended questions.

This study takes a bottom-up approach towards understanding the role of teacher cognition and decision-making with respect to learner motivation. The following section provides a theoretical framework in which student motivation, teacher autonomy, agency and cognition are briefly explored. Subsequently, the research methodology of this study will be explained, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings. Finally, implications for further research and policy-making will be discussed.

## Theoretical framework

Student motivation is a contextual factor that is not automatically 'given' in many teaching situations. On the contrary, working in classrooms where a large proportion of students do not display much interest in learning is sometimes even seen as the 'default setting'. Dörnyei (2001b, 143f.) distinguishes between three different concepts related to the absence of motivation: the *lack of initial interest* (which in the following will also be referred to as *lack of motivation*), *amotivation*, defined as the 'relative absence of motivation that is (…) caused (…) by the individual's experiencing feelings of incompetence and helplessness when faced with [an] activity' (see Deci and Ryan 1985) and *demotivation*, which is related to 'specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an on-going action'. The latter term refers, thus, to the situation of learners beginning to learn English with an initial interest, but losing it because of some specific external reasons, such as inappropriate teacher actions, learning materials or evaluation procedures.

In recent years, motivation research in foreign language learning has increasingly fused with research on autonomy (e.g. Ushioda 2011). Both teacher and learner autonomy have been found to play a role in the generation and maintenance of motivation in the language classroom. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000) is a major referent for these research areas, as it describes the importance of intrinsic motivation for human development, learning and well-being. Within this theory, *autonomy* is an essential factor, as it has been identified as one of three necessary conditions for the existence and support of intrinsic motivation, together with *competence* and *relatedness*.

Focusing on teacher autonomy in this context, teachers need to be able to think for themselves and find the structural possibilities – or spaces for manoeuvre – to implement teaching–learning strategies that can enhance motivation (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira 2007; Lamb and Reinders 2008). Teacher autonomy is usually conceptualised as something observable for the outsider, in that autonomy-allowing structures and independent behaviours can be witnessed by others. However, there is also a subjective side of autonomy, which might be described as a teacher's *sense of agency*. This term refers to a person's *subjective* awareness of being in control of his or her own actions, as opposed to the idea that it is other people or factors (e.g. traditions, 'structure', or the 'socially given') that restrict one's options to act according to one's own best judgement (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Coldron and Smith 1999).

*Agency* is a concept that has been explored from the point of view of various disciplines. Psychology and educational studies usually focus on the necessary conditions for the development of agency, whereas sociology and political theory are mainly interested in the importance of agency for the working of a democratic society. For this study, agency is understood as 'the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971; see also Biesta and Tedder 2006, 5). However, agency does not simply depend on each individual actor: it is always context-bound and has also been conceptualised in ecological terms (Biesta and Tedder 2006), as well as elaborated on from a socio-cultural perspective in Vygotsky's tradition (e.g. Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1993). Thus, Ahearn (2001) proposes a provisional definition of agency referring to 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (112). From a socio-cultural point of view, it is especially important that agency is mediated through psychological (and material) tools that were acquired culturally, through human interaction: 'Individuals can be no more intelligent than the psychological tools they employ. Indeed, it is not individuals, but individuals-operating-with-mediational-means, who define the basic unit of agency' (Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1993, 352).

In relation to teacher agency, the mediational means refer to their repertoire of motivational strategies, their teaching materials, or other tools that help them engage their students. However, as Biesta and Tedder (2006, 18f.) point out, it is not the case that individuals either 'have' or 'don't have' agency; rather, as agency always develops in situational contexts, they emphasise that agency can be 'achieved'. Another trait of agency is that it can be individual or collective (cf. Bandura 2001, 13). Thus, teachers can respond to their context individually, especially when taking decisions in their classrooms. They can also act collectively at different levels, such as locally by influencing assessment policies in their schools or nationally by organising and acting as members of teachers' unions. Finally, Emirbayer and

Mische ([1998]) highlight the temporal aspect of agency, where past 'habits' of actions can be overcome by imagining future alternatives.

When exploring the teachers' perspectives on their own capacity to act upon learners' motivation, it is necessary to explore the various influences on their decision-making processes (cf. Borg [2003]; Woods [1996]), which can be marked by constraints conceptualised as internal and external. Internal (or cognitive) constraints can include the lack of 'mediational means', insufficient experience or training, or paralysing beliefs about oneself as a teacher, the students, or the learning-teaching situation. External constraints – which are, of course, mediated by the teachers' cognition – include curricular policies such as prescribed syllabi, imposed learning resources, evaluation procedures and methodologies. All those factors that might either facilitate or constrain teacher autonomy will have an impact on the teachers' sense of agency and thus on their ability to visualise spaces for manoeuvre, which they can turn to their (and their students') advantage.

Therefore, *space for manoeuvre* will be defined as a perceived situation in which a teacher, based on an (explicit or implicit) analysis of a specific teaching–learning context, feels unconstrained to take her or his own decisions and implement actions aimed at improving some aspect of the pedagogical intervention (cf. Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira [2007]; Priestley et al. [2012]). Thus, teachers can achieve agency in the task of motivating their students. Without referring specifically to agency, an interesting model to envision the various 'spaces' of teacher autonomy has been proposed by La Ganza ([2008]), according to whom teacher autonomy is located in a 'Dynamic Interrelational Space' and could be seen as interacting with four important instances: first, teachers might have 'autonomy in relation to the teacher's own internal dialectics with teachers, mentors, or significant others who (…) might support (…) his or her freedom to be creative as a teacher (…)'. Second, they might (or might not) have 'autonomy in relation to learners, who might support the teacher's freedom to be creative as a teacher (…)'. Third, the teachers might be autonomous:

> in relation to those, in the institution in which he or she is teaching, who could potentially make decisions influencing the teacher's freedom to be creative as a teacher, to develop and practise ideas, and to pursue his or her ideals.

Finally, teachers might have 'autonomy in relation to those, in the institutions and bureaucracies of society at large, external to the institution where the teacher is employed, who could potentially make decisions influencing the teacher's freedom to be creative as a teacher (…)' (71f.).

## The present study

By emphasising the teachers' perspectives on learner motivation, this qualitative study explores the interplay between perceived learner motivation, external and internal constraints, and possible spaces for manoeuvre to positively influence students' motivation to learn English, in the context of secondary education in Chile. The guiding questions were the following:

(1) How motivated are students to learn English, according to their teachers' perception?
(2) What are the reasons they mention to explain either the presence or the absence of learner motivation?

(3) What contextual constraints and challenges with a potentially negative influence on learner motivation are mentioned by the teachers?
(4) What internal constraints can be inferred from the teachers' accounts that impede their use of motivational strategies?
(5) How do contextual and internal constraints interact?
(6) What spaces for manoeuvre are perceived by the teachers that help create and maintain learner motivation in spite of contextual constraints?

## Context and participants

Like Chilean society in general, the school system is marked by great social disparities. Depending on their parents' income, students attend either free municipal (funded by local authorities and state subsidies), semi-private (private state-subsidised, with optional additional fees paid by the families),[2] or expensive fee-paying private schools. To gain a balanced picture of the national situation, teachers from all three funding schemes were included in this study, in proportions approximately equal to those of the Chilean school system (see Table 1). The study focuses on teachers working in secondary schools, who teach students between 14 and 18 years of age.[3] Class sizes vary, especially in private and semi-private schools, but can reach up to 45 students.

The 19 (17 female and 2 male) participating teachers all work in the central region of Chile in urban or suburban contexts. All age groups were represented, from recently graduated teachers to those close to retirement. They were contacted either through personal acquaintances of the researcher or through a university-based in-service teacher training course.

## Data collection[4]

For data collection, a semi-structured interview of about 45 min was conducted with each of the participating teachers. To make them feel comfortable and thus increase the validity of the data, most of the interviews were carried out in the teachers' native language, Spanish. Only two participants chose to give their interview in English.

The interview questions first asked about general perceptions of the teachers' profession and the greatest challenges. If learner motivation was not mentioned by a certain point, the interviewer brought it up through more specific prompts, asking about the perceived level of motivation in general, about possible reasons for the presence or absence of motivation, and about teachers' strategies to increase motivation in the classroom.

Table 1.  Participants – teachers of English at Chilean secondary schools.

|        | Municipal schools | Semi-private schools | Private schools |
|--------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Female | 9                 | 7                    | 1               |
| Male   | 1                 | –                    | 1               |

*Data analysis*

The interview transcripts were sent to the teachers for member checks, on which occasion no requests for change were made. Subsequently, the data were analysed in their original language.

Content analysis was applied in order to find answers to research questions 1 and 2. After coding the teachers' answers in short phrases, some deductive categories were established that were closely based on the interview prompts. In relation to the various possible influences on student motivation, these prompts were related to external factors (those outside the immediate reach of the teacher's influence) and to factors that are internal to the classroom (cf. Williams and Burden 1997). When teachers mentioned other factors, inductive categories were established. Depending on the need to use prompts in order to directly elicit certain information, answers were labelled as 'spontaneous' or 'prompted', respectively. The findings related to this analytical step will be presented below under the heading 'General findings'.

In order to answer research questions 3, 4, 5 and 6, a few interviews were selected to examine internal relations between perceived challenges and constraints, teacher beliefs and reported classroom experiences and actions, and to contrast different manifestations of the teachers' sense of agency. Here, the research method followed a discourse analytical approach. A focus on the use of names and other nouns, personal pronouns and verbal modes in somebody's discourse can make visible the way in which the various participants in social events – in this case, the teaching of English – are mentioned, highlighted or omitted in discourse (Fairclough 2003), and how they attribute, hamper or deny agency to themselves or others (Ahearn 2001, 120). These more specific findings will be presented below under the heading 'Cases of agency'.

To make the data accessible to a wider audience, they were translated to English by the author. Some of the quotes were shortened to more readable texts, eliminating most false starts and re-phrasings of the original oral register, but, when in doubt, more literal (and perhaps less idiomatic) translations were preferred in order to keep the original ideas as truthful as possible, especially when this was necessary to highlight matters related to agency.

## General findings: perceived influences on learner motivation

The analysis of the interviews showed that a lack of student motivation is perceived to be one of the greatest challenges facing an English teacher in Chile. Sixteen (84%) of the teachers referred to problems in this area (ten of them – 53% – spontaneously); only four (21%) found that most of their students were motivated to learn English. However, it must be noted that student motivation is generally not considered to be an English-specific problem, although there might be specific reasons for students not to be motivated to learn English. Neither is there consensus on whether students are more or less motivated to learn English than any other school subjects, even if overall motivation is low. The schools that are most affected by low student motivation are municipal schools. Table 2 summarises the perceived influences on learner motivation.

Table 2.  Summary of perceived influences on learner motivation.

| Categories | Number of teachers | Influences: Positive + Negative − Either ± | Sample quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| *External factors* | | | |
| Family background | 12 | ± | 'If the family supports [the educational process] I think you could say that you have won eighty per cent of the battle.' (semi-private, prompted) |
| 'Island mentality' | 6 | − | 'Because some [students] complain "oh, why do we study English if we are in Chile (…) if here, like our neighbours, we are all Hispanics and we can all understand each other".' (municipal, spontaneous) |
| Globalisation | 5 | + | 'Even in those schools where people think that you are not going to find any kid that is (…) very motivated to learn English – there is always somebody who is motivated because today there is more access to information.' (semi-private, spontaneous) |
| *Classroom factors* | | | |
| Topics and contents | 8 | ± | 'Activities that have to do with them. I mean, I can't put on a song for them from 1950 because obviously they will get bored at once. (…) Activities, or songs, or games, that are adequate for their age' (semi-private, prompted) |
| Song and music | 7 | + | 'Music is a phenomenal bait for English' (semi-private, spontaneous) |
| Teaching techniques | 6 | ± | 'So I made a type of cards … pairwork … (…) there were different types of activities … so they chose the cards and rotated (…) I realised that they got very motivated because they took the cards and 'what do we have to do with this?' (…) They loved it. (…) In the end they did the lesson, they did not even realise. I only guided them.' (semi-private, prompted) |
| Teacher personality | 3 | + | 'The motivation that someone would have … . coming to my classes (…) they know that the teacher they're gonna have … . it's a teacher that really likes the language (…) believes that it's important (…) they know that I like to laugh … I like to have fun (…) and I think that they realise that we're gonna have fun' (private, prompted) |
| *Psychological factors* | 8 | − | 'There is a (…) large percentage of children who feel overwhelmed by English. I mean, they have convinced themselves that they don't have the ability and the competences, that they are bad at it, that they have never learned it and that's it.' (municipal, prompted) |

## External factors

We understand external factors as those influencing learner motivation 'before the students enter the classroom'. In the analysis, three categories were identified: family background, a so-called 'island mentality' and globalisation. They are significant, in

that, many teachers attribute a crucial role to them. However, they are outside the teachers' reach of action, and if given too much importance, they might stop teachers from developing a sense of agency. If this is the case, teachers might fail to notice opportunities in which they can exercise agency in order to motivate their students.

The first of the three categories is the students' family background, which depending on the support that it grants to students, can either work against or foster motivation. In relation to this, it is necessary to distinguish between the *general* motivation to learn, i.e. to succeed at school regardless of the subject, and the *specific* motivation to learn English. Problematic home backgrounds are among the challenges that twelve of the interviewed teachers mentioned, making the task of educating the students increasingly difficult. This does not only apply to the very disadvantaged sectors of society; 'absent' parents, regardless of their socio-economic level, are considered to be partly responsible for the students' apathy and lack of motivation to study.

The specific interest in English is more strongly linked to the other two, apparently opposing categories. Thus, especially in the more disadvantaged sectors of Chilean society, the general cultural context and a kind of 'island mentality' discards the study of a foreign language as something unnecessary, thus playing against the initial motivation to learn English. In contrast, five teachers said that the improved status of English through globalisation and its perceived usefulness have, on the whole, contributed to a more positive appraisal of the opportunity to learn English. Access and exposure to the language through entertainment media have contributed to increasingly positive attitudes towards English, within a panorama of great social disparities and consequent differences in the interest to learn English.

### Classroom factors

Classroom factors are those that in the teachers' experience have an impact on the students' motivation *inside* the classroom and are mainly based on the teachers' use of activities, contents and dynamics. When given this prompt, eight teachers immediately mentioned motivating contents or topics; seven teachers referred to songs or music; six teachers talked about teaching techniques or types of activities. Another motivating factor that was referred to by many teachers is the teacher her- or himself: some teachers mentioned specific aspects of their personality as potentially motivating, such as being approachable or sharing the students' experiences.

All teachers were prompted to talk about motivating contents as they were one of the central concerns of this study. In most cases, teachers depend very much on the textbooks that either the government has commissioned and distributed to schools or that some semi-private and private schools have asked parents to buy. This dependence is related to both little time for materials preparation and school policies that encourage or enforce the use of textbooks. Consequently, teachers observed that some texts provided in the books had greater motivating potential than others. For example, there was agreement that topics needed to be related to the teenagers' world in order to be motivating. Some teachers added extra topics to the standard material, such as swearwords, informal language or their experience abroad (only few teachers have travelled to English-speaking countries), and found their uses motivating. Music and songs also figure among the materials provided on the

teachers' initiative and due to their great success were coded as a separate salient category. Opportunities for teachers to exercise agency in relation to material selection seem an important factor in the creation of motivation in the classroom. Some teachers explained that they had chosen these topics upon students' requests, so this is a crucial area in which learner autonomy and teacher autonomy meet.

Teaching techniques or types of activities as motivational factors were mentioned by the teachers without a specific prompt; they included games, fun and humour, the use of technology or the Internet, short, snappy activities, student-centred lessons or pair work, stimulating visuals, task-based learning, contextualised grammar, easy traditional copying tasks (to the surprise of the teacher), drama and creative tasks, and city excursions. In contrast to those factors that can make English lessons more motivating, there were also some teachers who attributed the students' *lack of motivation* to topics or teaching techniques that they had found to be counter-productive. Several teachers said that generally it was difficult to motivate students to practise reading comprehension and that grammar exercises were another motivation 'killer'.

### Psychological factors

The research design was deliberately devised to focus on external factors influencing student motivation, such as the cultural or family background or classroom-related issues, especially the topics presented in the textbooks. However, in eight of the interviews, the teachers elaborated on student motivation from an individual, psychological viewpoint in much detail, so an additional inductive category was established. The main problem that teachers saw is that students find English difficult, if not impossible, to understand and therefore 'shut down' in English lessons. Underlying reasons for these comprehension problems are to be found in previous learning experiences, low grades, or in the symptomatic heterogeneity of students' levels in many secondary schools. Six teachers mentioned the students' age as a problem, especially for speaking activities, as some students find these activities embarrassing, though in theory enjoyable. One teacher referred to the detrimental effect of extrinsic motivation ('a lot of people only care about what's on the test'), while other teachers stated that 'not even grades, not even extrinsic motivation' work with their students.

The students' feeling of incompetence, originating in failures and obstacles in the learning process, seems to be the focus of many teachers' personal theories in relation to motivation. It is true that according to several of the established motivation theories, a feeling of competence (or 'ability beliefs') is essential to the maintenance of motivation, including expectancy-value theory (Wigfield and Eccles 2000) and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000). In the latter, however, autonomy and relatedness play an equally important role, which does not seem to be at most teachers' centre of attention.

### Cases of agency

In this section, a discourse analysis of a few selected interview passages will demonstrate how teachers find, or struggle to find, spaces for agency within a panorama of various external and internal constraints, in order to give answers to research questions 3, 4, 5 and 6.

### Contextual constraints

The external pressures working against teachers' autonomy to employ motivational strategies, generally beyond the teachers' immediate reach or area of influence, consist of a variety of factors. The interview with Pamela,[5] the youngest of the interviewed teachers, shows how low expectations, lack of support, and difficult access to motivational resources can work together to undermine a young teacher's efforts to encourage her students to learn:

> They say 'what … uhm … learn English for if we are in Chile' … so like they don't feel it's something necessary … because I believe that here in Chile they aren't given the opportunities so they can succeed … so … it's the same to them if they know English or not if they know that they will end up working – I don't know, sweeping the streets. That is the vision that I think the government has of what they expect from the students. In fact, my own colleagues, let's say the older ones say: 'oh but what for?' They don't teach them anything anymore because it's the same to them, because 'if that girl is not going to go to university, she won't be anybody important, so I won't offer her anything'. It's been super difficult for me because I arrived at this school and I realised that the kids didn't know any English at all … they didn't know the most basic things. (…) I asked them why … I don't think everything is the teacher's fault. But they told me for example that the teacher arrived and told them that she met her grandson, or her cousins … stories that had nothing to do with the subject … . So it annoyed me because … uhm … one has to make a double effort of getting the classes up to level and teaching them all from scratch again, and make them see it's important. (municipal, spontaneous)

The interview passage is marked by the use of the third person: 'they' refers to Pamela's students first, then the government is mentioned and finally, her older colleagues. It is also accompanied by several uses of direct speech, in which Pamela quotes her students and her colleagues, turning her own discourse into a multi-voiced dialogue (Bakhtin 1981). The message that these three different voices provide is essentially the same: learning English is not important for these youngsters. Within this chorus, Pamela struggles to find her own voice. She mainly uses 'I' to express beliefs about what the government's real commitment might be, based on her observations, and to express uncertainty. Apart from that, her self-references are mostly in the object case, when saying things are 'difficult to *her*' or the situation annoyed *her*. Finally, she uses the impersonal 'one' (*uno* in Spanish) to explain the effort that is necessary to turn round this complicated situation, which could be an inclusive reference to all teachers who are in the same situation as her. The expression 'one' could be interpreted as a marker of collective agency: although at her school she does not get much support, on a larger scale she does not feel alone, as she knows what others might expect from her in the same situation. Later on, she contrasts what she 'wants to do' with what she 'has to do' in order to achieve her aims, pointing out once more the lack of support from her co-workers, who apparently refuse to help her, while they do assist other teachers when they perceive the subject as more important:

> For example I want to do different things and the tools to do it are not there. Sometimes I want to use the projector to show a presentation, something more fun, movies, and for that I have to go to look for the projector to a certain floor to do the whole procedure and then time is up, the lesson is over by just plugging it in and all that (…) So there is a lack of commitment in general … and it's the people who work at the school, they say like 'oh, you go!' I mean, they don't think the subject is important.

When explaining her choice of technological tools as a motivational strategy, she comes back once more to the comments she receives from her older colleagues, using direct speech to demonstrate their unwelcoming attitude on her being 'different':

> It's more fun for them, it's easier for me, but as the teachers aren't used to technology nobody uses it so 'you, why are you going to use it? why are you going to be different?'

However, Pamela does not blame her older peers only. She actually believes that the government initiatives have forgotten about the marginalised sector in which she is working:

> So yes, I have the commitment problem, and the other one with authorities that don't – I don't know what's up because maybe … they made an 'English opens doors' pro- gramme, they have done thousands of things but at the school, the resources don't arrive. Where are they? So I don't know if they got lost on the way, or if they are in Santiago, I have no idea.

Using La Ganza's framework (2008), the 'Dynamic Interrelational Space' in which Pamela can develop her creativity as a motivating teacher is interfered with by an institutional culture that is hostile to innovation and based on low expectations, and which in itself functions as an intermediary between neglect on a larger scale (the government) and the students, who have internalised the role that this system has apparently assigned to them. On the other hand, Pamela's 'internal dialectics' seem to give her the necessary strength to continue with her efforts against all odds, as she has a clear idea about where students' lack of motivation stems from, as well as what strategies she could use in order to reverse the situation.

### Internal constraints

Just as the external context can make the task difficult of motivating one's students to learn English, there can be certain limitations within the teachers' cognition that play against their use of motivational strategies. One such limitation might be related to knowledge. If a teacher training programme fails to offer a deep-reaching discus- sion about potentially motivating learning contents and activities, newly qualified teachers in particular might lack the repertoire that could turn them into innovative, engaging teachers. Another such limitation might be related to teacher beliefs about motivation, for example, that there is nothing to be done about lacking motivation, or that the way to motivate students to learn English lies essentially in telling them about future benefits awaiting them once they have finished school. Finally, some teachers might also feel limited because they do not trust their capabilities to inno- vate and prefer to follow the instructions they receive from upper levels of school management, without seeing their – possibly restricted – spaces for manoeuvre. The following quote by Janet, a teacher at a semi-private all-girls school, is enlightening in that it combines self-criticism with criticism of the government textbooks that lead to waning motivation:

> Sometimes we ourselves [laughs], our methodologies make the kids lose motivation. (…) Because I started noticing that – we get textbooks that are quite boring, that's the truth, with topics that for the kids who are fourteen, fifteen years old – they need a lot more life experience to understand that topic. I mean, we are talking about global warming, about pollution, oxygen and all that. But at that age the girls need maybe the

same topic to be focused in a different way. (…) Then I realised that in the computer room they were chatting in English, look[ing] for songs in English, I mean – so there is a lot of motivation (…) [W]e are talking about 42 students in the room, too. I mean, it's like difficult to find out – [surprised tone] 'oh, (…) you like English so much that you look for songs, watch movies in English' and all that, but in class, facing the methods that [the teacher] was using, the student did not pay much attention, you see. So from what I can see I would say that (…) on a scale in the classroom there is a forty per cent motivation; but in reality, in practice, I think it is more. (…) It's because – it's not English. Many times it's our methodology that puts our students off; let's say the enthusiasm towards the subject. Yes, they are enthusiastic, but about the music, all that, but not (…) the lesson. (semi-private, spontaneous)

The interesting aspect of this quote is its reflectiveness, which is one aspect of agency. Janet displays her capacity to question 'habitual patterns of social engagement' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971), and by emphasising the inclusive first person plural, she does so on a collective level, referring to methodologies that English teachers usually employ. Emirbayer and Mische's theory focuses on the temporal aspect of agency, which is useful for examining this quote, too, because Janet analyses a past event (in the computer room) to 'discover' an 'interactional', habitual element in teachers' actions. However, the data do not give a conclusive answer to the question whether Janet has the *mediational means* (Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom 1993) at hand to be able to generate 'alternative possible trajectories of action' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) for present and future situations. Such means could be, for example, knowledge about autonomous learning settings, in which the abovementioned intrinsic motivation of her students could be exploited.

## Interaction between external and internal constraints

The following example illustrates how external pressures and constraints and the teacher's beliefs can interact in a way that undermines the teacher's sense of agency. Viviana works in an inner-city municipal all-girls school. To her, teaching English is a 'challenge'. One of her constraining beliefs is that students either have the talent for learning languages or don't, or are either motivated or not, but there is no 'in between'. According to her, the causes for this predisposition to either learn the language or not are rooted in the students' family backgrounds and the support that the students can or cannot obtain for independent learning at home – a factor which is clearly beyond her range of influence. Her discourse is marked by the use of the third person, together with an accumulation of negations and other expressions that refer to the absence of certain factors:

They don't have many people that they can ask out there because their parents went to school for three years, because they didn't finish primary or secondary education, or they have to work all day and they [the kids] are alone at home, and they have nobody to ask. They don't have English books in their homes either and even if their parents were there, as they had so little formal teaching, formal education in fact they don't have permanent support. That's why they find it difficult.

Another problem that she perceives is rooted in the excessive governmental standardisation that has been promoted for English teaching. In her view, it does not account enough for the differences between the various schools and the backgrounds of the students (cf. Gysling 2007; Pinto 2008).

Talking about her relationship with the students, she refers to a division between those few students who identify with her, who like English and would like to 'speak

like her', and those students who are not interested in her or in the language. Referring to herself, by repeatedly using the verb 'can' (*puedo*) in questions and negative expressions, she expresses her own feeling of incapacity to change students' attitudes:

> 'You don't want to learn … what can I do? I mean, I can stand on my head, we do all of that, I have no problem, but if you don't want to I can't force you' … that's the problem.

By putting the students first in her sentences, she reveals how her perceived role consists in reacting to, not acting upon students' motivation:

> I think that honestly it comes more from them than from me. They come with the interest and I reinforce it.

The static vision of motivation, contrary to 'process models' of learning motivation (cf. Dörnyei and Ottó 1998), seems to have a paralysing effect on the teacher. However, it is countered by another observation, which refers to her experience that sometimes students start with certain degrees of motivation but lose it as soon as they are faced with the first assessment procedures. The teacher interjects direct speech to relate the talk she gives to motivate students. Interestingly, she refers to everybody's ability to learn English, which is clearly in opposition to her opinion stated in other parts of the interview:

> They know it's very important and also, they always say, 'hey, this shouldn't be that difficult if they always say that English is easier than Spanish, right Miss?' they say … So I tell them 'Yes'. 'If I managed to learn Spanish can I speak English?' So I tell them 'of course you can, everybody can, everybody can do it'. But … they know that as a language it's important, I think they are clear about the importance it has, but as I tell you when it comes to the school subject, when evaluation starts for them, they start finding it boring, a nuisance.

Viviana's sense of agency seems to be restricted, on one hand, by her perception of the role that she has as a teacher, and motivating the non-motivated does not seem to be part of this role. In conjunction with this, the 'dynamic interrelational space' (La Ganza 2008), i.e. the relationship between her and her learners does not seem to call her to develop greater creativity. Since she does not complain about behaviour problems, she might feel that, apart from 'not being able' to do anything about motivation, there might also be no real need to change anything. In terms of institutional requirements, Viviana mentions 'the first evaluations' as an important source of student demotivation. However, she refers to them as unshakeable facts, rather than an institutional problem that interferes negatively with her students' motivation. It could be concluded that her sense of agency as a teacher is strongly affected by the students' lack of interest, stemming, according to her, from the low socio-economic background of her students – an external factor which she cannot control. On the other hand, she seems to lack the 'mediational means', i.e. knowledge about motivational strategies to apply within her school setting. Possibly her institutional environment does not support her in finding creative ways to counter this problem, either.

### Spaces for manoeuvre

Even though some of the mentioned external constraints on teacher autonomy and agency could clearly be alleviated through more effective institutional and

governmental support, the data collected for this study also showed that some teachers with a developed sense of agency reported higher levels of learner motivation. The 'spaces for manoeuvre' that they pointed out relate mainly to the three following areas: immediacy of experience, learner autonomy and empowering contents.

## Immediacy of experience

In the analysis of the interviews, one recurrent but not anticipated element was inductively categorised as 'motivational talks'. This category encompasses those interview passages in which teachers quoted themselves in their 'typical' classroom talk, repeating what they would usually tell the students in order to try to motivate them to learn English. According to Dörnyei (2001a), these talks could form part of a series of motivational strategies to 'generate initial motivation' by (mainly) 'enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes' through persuasive communication (50ff.). The interview data suggest that those 'motivational' talks that merely refer to the future instrumental usefulness of English do not seem to have the desired effect and, on the contrary, may turn more teenage students off. However, some of the teachers described other ways of motivating students that do appear to fulfil their purpose.

For example, Gabriela works at an urban mixed semi-private school and is a passionate and ambitious teacher with clear professional goals, who goes out of her way to make the most of professional development opportunities. Her interview is quite different from most of the others as she does not appear to have any problem with student motivation. In fact, she estimates her students' motivation level as being between '80 and 90 percent'. And what is more, her highly developed sense of agency seems to be the main constituent of her teacher identity. Although, just like other teachers, she complains about some bureaucratic and administrative constraints, she does not lament about 'the students nowadays'. On the contrary, she relates how she tunes in with the students' interests, especially in terms of technology use and learning content choice. Even though she seems to use some 'motivational talks' with her students, what becomes salient is that she *does* things to exploit the *immediate* relevance of English in the students' lives, rather than *telling* them what English might be good for later on; the learning experience at school cannot rely exclusively on the anticipation of 'future reward' (cf. Dewey [1938] 1998). For example, Gabriela refers to using topical issues (e.g. the Olympic Games) and active, task-based approaches (such as participating in a *real* online poll for the 'New Seven Wonders of the World') as having a very positive impact on student motivation. Her lessons are based on meaningful communication with interesting, cognitively challenging and holistic activities. In her discourse, we can observe a recurrent use of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' in the subject positions of her sentences, emphasising her own decision-making and also her being part of the learning community that she has created with her students:

> I think they are super motivated. But that is because I am very motivating. Because I make it big, I tell them that it is really important. I make them cook at school. I don't know, for example for Halloween we have a Halloween party with the little ones, at the end of the year we sing Christmas carols, with the older ones we make displays. So I always keep telling them, I push them, I tell them that it's important.

Favourable external conditions for motivating her students might consist in the availability of resources: Internet access, additional spaces at school or in a classroom to change the more traditional classroom routines, and time to be up-do-date about anything that might be of interest to students. The teacher's internal capacities are related to an ability to obtain necessary information, and the courage to innovate. For a comparative analysis, it must also be said that Gabriela works at a semi-private school and that she might not be faced with the problems that some of the other teachers have to tackle. She does not refer to the social background of her students in the interview, but by inference it is possible to suggest that in socio-economic and cultural terms, Gabriela works mainly with students that for other teachers would not constitute as great a challenge. In those terms, it seems that the institutional and structural 'dynamic interrelational spaces' (La Ganza 2008) allow Gabriela to exercise agency. Her use of motivational strategies forms a powerful link between her own beliefs and the positive relationship with her students.

### Learner autonomy

As Janet's quote above suggested, learners are increasingly autonomous in their out-of-class access to English-speaking materials, to the surprise of some teachers. Granting learners some of this autonomous space in classroom procedures is a way to exploit their innate curiosity and thus support intrinsic motivation. Various teacher interviews suggested a positive interrelationship between teacher autonomy (their spaces to manoeuvre towards greater learner participation), learner autonomy (ways to get students actively involved in the creation of learning opportunities), and motivation.

Tania works at a public all-girls' school with a vocational orientation. The social background of her students is similar to that of Viviana's students. Even though she describes the difficulties associated with working with students from a deprived social background (teenagers from violent homes, with low self-esteem, few expectations for the future, and low learning motivation in general), her attitude seems to be more positive. She highlights the need to make her teaching and the content interesting and relevant to the students:

> What one teaches needs to be pertinent and attractive, so they can take ownership of the contents, of the situations. It needs to be meaningful.

Rather than expressing frustration about strict governmental guidelines, Tania highlights the flexibility that is given to her, so she can find topics that are interesting for the students. In her discourse, she also refers to herself and her own choices using 'I', as well as the inclusive 'we', referring to her students and herself. Furthermore, she puts the students into the subject position of her sentences when asking them about their interests, thus turning students into participants of her decision-making processes.

> In English I think one can handle things very flexibly (…) If we have to do modal verbs, I can do them with any topic in which the modal verbs are inserted so I choose topics that are – I believe – interesting for them. Anyway, I do a few surveys in the first lessons, we have a conversation and I ask them what they like, what they do, what music they listen to, what movie, things like that. We have seen a few movies, so after that we do a description of the characters for example, a physical and psychological description.

Apart from getting learners involved in the establishment of learning objectives and the determination of learning content (cf. Jiménez Raya, Lamb, and Vieira 2007, 59), other characteristics described in learner autonomy theory are also present in Gabriela's interview (see above), such as autonomous (critical) thinking and the out-of-class use of technology:

> I generally believe that I make the students think a lot, always about a topic, depending on their age, their level. (…) I always try to get them to reflect, compare, analyse, always reinforcing logical reasoning. We work with skills, so it points towards that.

> Sometimes I create activities on the Internet and I give them a small task and tell them 'send it to me by e-mail' (…) So the kids often say 'hey I send my homework to my teacher by Internet, by mail.' These minimal things you can't imagine how they motivate the children … because for them it is like 'wow, my teacher is cool' you know?

### *Empowering contents*

Finally, countering those negative experiences that teachers report when using the compulsory textbooks, here is an example of a teacher whose 'space to manoeuvre' consisted in the ability to find appropriate motivating content. Verónica gained her most significant teaching experience in a semi-private school for young adults who did not finish their secondary education in the regular system, due to problems associated with their very low socio-economic status. Her interview is evidence of a teacher with a very 'different' experience, who tries to engage her students in learning English by finding matches between the reality of their lives and what she can offer to them. The recognition of her students' experiences and previous knowledge serve as a starting point for her pedagogical intervention. For example, in class she has found it easier to build rapport with her students by being explicit and empathetic about their marginality in a class-conscious society. In this interview passage, she talks about her success in engaging her very disaffected students using music:

> I had a very good experience with a Phil Collins song. I wanted to make a difference with the grammar and wanted them to analyse the song a bit according to the little vocabulary they had. 'Another Day in Paradise.' Because it's slow, you see. (…) Some things are repeated. I used it because many of these students have the experience of this song, of living in the streets, not having money sometimes not even for food, because for example in the school where I was I took sandwiches because there were students who had not had breakfast for two days or three days and we had the experience of a student who lived with a dog and did not have a place to live, so he entered the school at night to sleep in a classroom (…) The social issue has been extremely heavy there. With this song it worked because the lyrics somehow caught their attention. Because they live in a poor environment, you see. They live or, to be more precise, some of them have roamed in the streets (…) Maybe I was the only teacher that put on a song, you see. (…) I mean, this class was one of those that were throwing papers, who turned over the desks, so you had to watch out if they were coming in on drugs or drunk to send them back home because most of them are violent. The girls work as prostitutes, you see? But when I put on the song for them to listen they all went quiet and their interest was huge as to the content of the song. (…). They were happy with the song and then they wanted to continue analysing songs in the following lessons. (…) after that lesson, the students started coming to class, some of them with their mp4 players and 'miss, look, listen to this song, what does it say?' and they had me listen. Then, 'here I have the lyrics, what does this mean, and that?' you see? This was what it generated: every class they brought a song that they liked.

Interestingly, Verónica's talk starts with her being the agent of the reported actions ('I'); after her description of the song lesson, the students ('they') are the agents, becoming actively involved in their own learning process. Consciously or unconsciously, this teacher has tapped into the three needs that must be met according to self-determination theory so that intrinsic motivation can be fostered. First, she chooses a song that is slow and repetitive, helping her students to feel *competent* because they can understand. Then, she makes sure that the contents of the song relate to their reality and shows herself empathetic about it, valuing her students' need for *relatedness*. Finally, after the lesson, she allows her students to choose more learning material, fostering their *autonomy*.

This example shows how a teacher with few external constraints concerning materials, an understanding of her students' reality, and sufficient cultural repertoire to choose a song with suitable lyrics (which might be seen as her 'mediational means' here) can effectively turn around a situation in which most students come to class with an apathetic attitude. Thus, she gives her students a sense of ownership of the language that they are supposed to learn. On the contrary, those teachers who for various reasons have no choice but to work with a textbook selected by someone else might miss precious opportunities to engage their students. In this sense, the external freedom and internal capacities to choose or adapt materials can work as an empowering tool both for teachers and their learners.

## Conclusion

The analysis above showed that cognitions and beliefs about learner motivation can be traced in teacher discourse and examined effectively through a discourse analytical approach. These cognitions are varied and depend on interacting contextual and internal factors, influencing the way in which teachers employ and evaluate motivational strategies in specific learning settings.

However, beyond the data analysed here, and to do justice to the complexity of the concepts *motivation*, *autonomy* and *agency*, it is necessary to consider the wider framework of social relations in which teaching and learning is taking place. Increasing regulation of curricula and bureaucratic control over teachers' work are among the features of worldwide neoliberal educational policies, leading to the 'devaluing and deskilling [of] teacher work' (Giroux 2012). In Chile, the critical curriculum analyst Pinto (2008) has pointed out how curricular decisions have progressively been taken over by the Ministry of Education and 'technical-pedagogical departments' at schools, leaving classroom teachers with only restricted opportunities to select material and decide on teaching content, even though they ultimately have the best knowledge of their students' needs, interests and motivations. For Pinto, this is in urgent need of being challenged by critical, reflexive teachers.

How can educational research support teachers in this struggle to regain control over their own work? I believe that there are two pathways to follow. First, qualitative research such as the study presented here should be linked up to pre-service and in-service teacher education. Teachers and researchers could collaborate in action research projects based on the study of external and internal constraints and a careful examination of their own discourse in order to then open up spaces in which autonomy and learner motivation can reign (cf. Vieira et al. 2008). In this context, teacher education programmes must include opportunities to reflect on the philosophical *and* practical implications of self-determination and autonomy as the purpose of

education. They should give pre-service and in-service teachers the possibility to explore practical approaches to autonomy and motivational strategies, evaluating their success. They should also consider the empowering and motivating potential of certain contents and learning resources.

Second, in order to be able to give 'hard data' to policymakers, it might be necessary to complement qualitative studies with large-scale quantitative research on the interrelationships between teacher autonomy, learner motivation and learning progress. Quantitative data might have more persuasive power to counter educational policies that are currently undermining teacher creativity and their (sense of) agency. It is necessary for decision-makers at higher levels to regain trust in the capacities of the individual teachers, in their abilities to relate to their students' contexts and to find the most appropriate materials, teaching–learning strategies and evaluation procedures. This is a necessary condition for teachers to be allocated more time and opportunities for personal and collective reflection and the selection, adaptation and creation of materials within their paid school hours (cf. Gysling 2007). It is true that the power of those 'behind' the official policymakers might present a fairly gloomy, paralysing scenario to those who seek a more humane educational future. Nevertheless, as Freire (2004) reminds us, our duty as teachers and researchers is to keep up the hope that things can change for the better and to continue working towards this goal.

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## Disclosure statement

## Notes

1. The data shown here are also part of a doctoral study that explored the Chilean context for teaching English, with an emphasis on teachers' perceptions of their professional identity, student motivation and pertinent learning contents (Glas 2013).
2. The educational reform of 2014 proposes phasing out additional fees for schools that receive state subsidies.
3. In Chile, secondary education comprises the last four years of compulsory schooling (years 9–12).
4. Apart from the interviews, data collection for the wider research framework of the doctoral study included written documents, such as governmental curricular guidelines and textbooks, which were analysed in order to determine the opportunities for identification and motivation these elements granted to students, and to triangulate these data with the teachers' interview responses.
5. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

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