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Department of English Studies, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts, Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz

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Creative writing for publication: An action research study of motivation, engagement, and language development in Argentinian secondary schools

Darío Luis Banegas

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0225-0866>

dario.banegas@strath.ac.uk

Robert J. Lowe

Tokyo Kasei University, Itabashi, Japan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2411-0330>

robert-l@tokyo-kasei.ac.jp

Abstract

There has been much research on the connections between second language (L2) writing and learner motivation. However, few studies have focused on contexts in which L2 learning is mandatory, rather than elective. This technical action research-based study evaluated a project in which teenage learners in Argentina were engaged in creative writing tasks, with the goal of including their final written pieces in a formal publication. Through focus group interviews and group discussions, it was found that the project had increased the motivation not only of the learners, but also of the teachers. Further, the study highlights the importance of making such writing tasks student-centered, and calls attention to the role played by the teachers in motivating and engaging students. The study suggests that effort should be made to develop more initiatives in formal education settings in order to motivate and engage learners involved in mandatory language study.

Keywords: motivation; engagement; creative writing; L2 learning experience

1. Introduction

Current research on second language (L2) writing education shows that learners usually develop writing skills in English through guided and free writing in various genres (Burns & Siegel, 2018; Seloni & Henderson-Lee, 2020; Silva et al., 2019). In the case of teenage learners, Maley and Bolitho (2015) suggest that creative writing tasks which involve learners' imagination may lead to an increase in motivation, engagement, and consequently, authentic opportunities for language practice and development. While teachers are provided with guidance on how to navigate creative writing with teenage learners for motivation and language development (e.g., Rich, 2014), there is little evidence about the relationship among these three constructs, particularly when creative writing is employed as an intervening strategy to improve authenticity of audience and learning conditions.

In this study, creative writing is understood as a form of personal expression. As a pedagogical task, creative writing offers an authentic purpose of writing since learners can express something in their own words. Authenticity of audience can be incorporated into L2 instruction if, for example, learners' writing is socialized beyond the context of the classroom (Banegas et al., 2020). In this regard, this study aligns with the writer-oriented approach, which explores writing in situated practices (Hyland, 2016). This approach may help us understand writing as personal expression in L2 education and its effects on motivation and language learning experience (Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011). In this technical-action-research-based paper, we examined whether engaging secondary school learners in creative writing for publication exerted a positive influence on their language learning motivation and language development in a setting (Argentina) where English language learning is mandatory, a circumstance which may affect learner motivation (Lamb, 2012). We believe that in such contexts, studies on the relationship among creative writing for publication, motivation, engagement and L2 learning can provide practitioners with teaching strategies conducive to meaningful and engaging L2 learning.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Language learning motivation

In English language teaching (ELT), motivation is often defined as a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent construct that seeks to describe and explain a person's drive to act (Dörnyei, 2020; Dörnyei et al., 2015; Lamb, 2017; Ushioda, 2018). According to Ushioda (2013), motivation "is perhaps one of the key variables that distinguishes first language acquisition from second language acquisition" (p.

1). However, Dörnyei (2019) contends that while motivation is a powerful construct to understand the potential behavior of an L2 learner, the notion of engagement is a potent concept to explain a learner's actual participation in the language learning classroom (see also Darvin & Norton, 2021).

In this study, we draw on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system. This model is built on three dimensions: (1) the ideal L2 self, (2) the ought-to L2 self, and (3) the L2 learning experience. While the first two dimensions are closer to future-self guides about imagined and expected identities in the L2 classroom, the third dimension refers to "the perceived quality of the learner's engagement with various aspects of the learning process" (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 20). This study concentrates on teenage learners' current experiences with learning English as a foreign language in Argentinian secondary education. We wish to understand the extent to which their language learning motivation is translated into engagement in formal education. The journey from motivation to engagement might be influenced by multiple social, contextual, and relational factors (Ushioda, 2013), teachers' practices and support (Pavelescu, 2019), teacher-student relationships (Henry & Thorsten, 2018), imagined identities, peer collaboration, and learners' investment in the learning processes and outcomes (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Norton, 2020).

Studies on language learning motivation have usually been contextualized in higher education and situations where language learning was voluntary. Motivational dissonances might create tensions in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom when English study is mandatory, as is usually the case of teenagers in secondary education. Lamb (2017) calls for research projects which investigate language learning motivation in contexts where English is a mandatory school subject and where it is not socially used in daily activities, and this call has been met in recent publications (e.g., Banegas, 2019; Pavelescu, 2019). While these studies provide insights into teenage learners' needs for authentic topics, tasks, and materials, they do not address how specific language skills such as creative writing can be supported by engaging learners in motivating activities.

2.2. Language learning motivation and creative writing

Henry and Thorsten (2018) underline that creative writing activities such as writing a short story, a comic or a poem may enable learners to use the target language for personal expression and engender higher levels of motivation, investment, and engagement in L2 learning. Creative writing activities can empower learners to become self-reflective (Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019), and help teachers gain insights about their identities as learners. However, Zhao (2014) suggests that for learners to thrive in creative writing processes, instructions need to avoid becoming overly prescriptive.

A few studies are of particular interest since they concentrate on young learners and creativity, usually represented in creative writing activities. Ahlquist (2013) investigated the impact that a storyline approach had on a class of Swedish 11-13-year-olds. The approach consisted of engaging the learners in creating a story through group work. Drawing on questionnaire findings, the author highlights that this creative approach had a positive effect on learner motivation. The learners viewed the experience as motivating as it allowed them to use their imagination and work collaboratively with a clear purpose. Using the same storyline approach and group work, Ahlquist (2019) investigated three classes of 15- and 16-year-olds in Sweden to see whether teenagers' reticence to speak English in class could be reduced. Questionnaire data showed that the learners' accuracy and willingness to communicate improved as they found the creative tasks motivating and authentic.

In an action research project aimed at enhancing a group of 15-17-year-olds' writing skills at a rural secondary school in Colombia, Guzmán Gámez and Moreno Cuellar (2019) engaged learners in creative and collaborative writing through the use of *Plotagon*, a software that enables learners to create interactive digital stories collaboratively. Through surveys, direct observation, and the analysis of learners' digital stories, the authors concluded that the learners displayed improvement in the length of production, syntactic and lexical complexity, and accuracy of writing. In addition, the pedagogical intervention enhanced learners' motivation, as they could write on topics of personal interest.

A study by Terada (2019) in Japan examined teacher-student interactions during expressive writing tasks. In this study, students wrote about topics of personal interest, and teachers gave continuous feedback on both the form and meaning of the students' writing. Terada found that the feedback from the teachers acted as a motivating factor, which pushed the students to work harder and find enjoyment in expressing their ideas. The study also showed how the personal nature of the assignments made the students more engaged in their writing.

The aforementioned studies show creative writing as an authentic and engaging activity. According to Pinner (2016), authenticity plays a pivotal role in language learning motivation. As an authentic task, creative writing can boost learner motivation as learners can express their identities (real and/or imagined, past, present, and/or future). To support this view, Rojas Alvarez (2011) engaged her teenage learners in writing and interacting through digital blogs. The experience proved successful as the learners felt that both their motivation to write and English language proficiency improved because the blogs entailed being in contact with genuine readers. Hence, creative writing for publication may contribute to maximizing the authenticity of audience dimension that writing entails when it is viewed as social practice (Hyland, 2016).

The studies reviewed above illustrate the pedagogical potential of creative writing when it is used in the EFL classroom with teenage learners. Nonetheless, few studies have investigated the relationship among teenage student creative writing for publication, motivation, and English language development. Against this backdrop, two research questions guided this technical action research study:

1. Can creative writing for publication enhance teenagers' language learning motivation and engagement?
2. What aspects of the L2 learning experience act as motivation and engagement factors in a writing for publication experience?

3. Research methodology

This study adopted a technical action research approach (Burns, 2005). In this type of action research, university-based educators work with teachers to address a pre-defined, classroom-based issue with the aim of introducing changes and examining them to improve specific teaching and learning experiences (Cain & Harris, 2013). As it is a joint project, teacher participation was voluntary. In addition, the tailoring of the project to meet contextual demands and learner needs was in the participating teachers' hands. As part of a larger initiative, the technical action research project was implemented in the province of Chubut, southern Argentina, in 2018 and 2019, amid teacher strikes and social unrest. It should be noted that the school year in Argentina starts in March and finishes in early December, with a two-week break in July.

In early 2018, the Ministry of Education carried out a series of teacher meetings to discuss an internal report which revealed that English was the subject that most secondary school learners failed as they found the subject demotivating (Banegas, 2019). According to the learners' answers included in the report, the main demotivating factor was the lack of genuine, meaningful and communicative practices in the English lesson. In his capacity as a curriculum developer, the first author of this article suggested that a writing for publication project may increase learners' motivation, and, consequently, their grades. With learner demotivation as the main concern, the ELT team launched an initiative called *Chubut escribe en inglés (Chubut writes in English)*. The initiative included a call for contributions, with the aim of promoting creative writing for an authentic audience within and beyond schools. The call was distributed online among state secondary schools and invited EFL teachers to encourage their teenage learners to submit individually or collaboratively authored written pieces. The call for contributions clarified that the project entailed expert review and that the accepted versions would be compiled in a digital volume for use by

other EFL teachers and learners in 2019. The volume released in 2019 was used by 142 teachers in Argentina during the 2019 school year.

Together with the call, EFL teachers received a set of guidelines which (1) summarized the main features of process writing, (2) offered practical tips on how to design and implement pre-, while-, and post-reading and writing activities including clear linguistic aims (e.g., using a story to recycle passive voice or adjectives to describe feelings), and (3) suggested volumes to support their practices such as Maley (2018) and Spiro (2004, 2006). Teachers were required to express interest in the project before being invited to submit their learners' creative pieces between August and November 2018. Of the 34 teachers who expressed interest and submitted work, 17 agreed to carry out the technical action research phase of the project. In this paper, three from this latter group became the participating teachers. The action research (AR) was divided into two cycles (Table 1). In this paper, we report the outcomes of the evaluation stages.

Table 1 Technical action research cycles

Cycle	Stage	Activities
Cycle 1 August-November 2018	Initial investigation	School meetings between ministerial authorities and EFL teachers. Agreement to engage in a creative writing initiative.
	Action	Teachers planned creative writing lessons individually or in collaboration with other teachers. The first author provided feedback on the lesson plans.
	Implementation (pedagogical intervention)	Each teacher implemented the lessons with one class of their choice between August and November 2018.
	Evaluation	Discussion with the learners. Meetings with the first author to discuss the outcomes of the project.
Cycle 2 March-October 2019	Action	Teachers designed creative writing lessons which included readings from the digital volume described above.
	Implementation (pedagogical intervention)	Teachers implemented the lessons with the same group of learners.
	Evaluation	Discussion with the learners. Meetings with the first author to discuss the outcomes of the project.

3.1. Participants

As a means of illustrating the impact of the overall project, in this paper, we rely on data from three EFL teachers: Andrea, Beatriz, and Cecilia (pseudonyms) and three Year 3 classes (89 learners) from one school. Andrea had 30 students in her class, Beatriz taught 27, and Cecilia had 32. Selecting all the participants from one institution may allow others to see the collaborative nature underpinning both pedagogical and research undertakings framed in larger schemes of work.

The three teachers had between 10 and 12 years of professional experience. Andrea and Beatriz had graduated from a local initial English language

teacher education program. Cecilia did not have any formal training except for short courses, but given the shortage of EFL teachers in Chubut, she accepted teaching posts in secondary schools. They agreed to engage in the initiative and AR project as they also felt that learner demotivation was a serious issue. The 89 learners, aged between 15-16, had expressed that they did not find language learning motivating, particularly because the lessons were not context-responsive or built on authentic experiences (Banegas, 2019). According to the three participating teachers, most learners' level of English was between A1-A2, according to *the Common European Framework of Reference*. Nonetheless, 10% of them were at a B2 level as they were also enrolled in private language institutes. Some learners were preparing to take the First Certificate Exam.

3.2. Implementation

This section summarizes the pedagogical interventions carried out in both cycles by the three participating teachers.

In Cycle 1 (2018), each teacher delivered between six and eight writing lessons. While the lessons followed a communicative approach (Cooze, 2017) from a broadly sociocultural perspective (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014), the writing component was specifically informed by genre-based L2 writing instruction (Hammond & Derewianka, 2001; Han & Hiver, 2018) and process writing (Hyland, 2016) in order to help learners develop awareness of the distinctive features of creative or fictional writing. They did so by designing pre-, while-, and post-reading, listening, and speaking tasks based on pedagogically modified texts. By performing the tasks, learners developed not only comprehension skills, creative thinking skills, and awareness of creative writing features, but also grammatical and lexical awareness. It should be clarified that the lessons also contained clear language aims and opportunities for recycling language and learning new language items and functions. Process writing, with systematic attention to language awareness, was embedded in the writing tasks. After the speaking or listening tasks, the learners were asked to write a narrative text, a poem, or a comic. Whatever the genre, the texts were in response to a topic (e.g., pollution in Patagonia), a previous text (e.g., *Legends from Argentina*), a photograph, or a title or setting used as a trigger to promote creativity. Writing was both carried out in class and as homework, and the students worked on different drafts following teacher feedback. Teacher feedback was direct and formative and it included providing the correct form, or asking questions to help the students revisit their work. In November 2018, the students were invited to submit to their teacher their final piece for publication.

In Cycle 2 (2019), the pedagogical intervention followed the same principles as in 2018. However, the major change and innovation was that in 2019,

the volume containing the works of those learners who decided to submit a piece in response to the *Chubut escribe en inglés* call became reading input for different language development tasks. The learners submitted new pieces for publication in 2020. Due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown imposed on Argentina, the project was severely affected; hence, this paper does not include a discussion of the 2020 data.

3.3. Data collection instruments and analysis

The data were collected by means of several instruments. All of them are described in some detail below:

- *Reflective journal*: Each participating teacher kept a journal of their experiences, perceptions, and concerns. They were particularly asked to be systematic about learners' motivation and English language improvement because of the project. They also agreed to provide the first author with journal extracts to illustrate the themes identified.
- *Individual interviews with the teachers*: Each teacher was interviewed twice in Cycle 1 and twice in Cycle 2. The interviews were carried out in Spanish and lasted between 30-40 minutes. The teachers were asked to refer to their journals during their interviews and reflect on the ongoing benefits and challenges of the project in relation to learner motivation and English language development.
- *Group interviews with the teachers*: At the end of each cycle the three teachers were interviewed together. Carried out in Spanish, the interviews sought to evaluate each cycle of the project, paying special attention to learners' motivation and English language development. Both of these points were gauged on the basis of the teachers' perceptions.
- *Whole class discussions*: There were two class discussions, one at the end of each cycle, with each of the three classes. They were carried out in Spanish and led by each participating teacher and the first author. Each discussion included between 27 and 32 students, depending on the size of the class and the number of student absences. Discussions centered on the effect of the project on learners' motivation and English language development. The students had equal opportunities to express their views. They would either express them verbally or they would raise their hands to answer a question (e.g., Did the lesson become less coursebook-dependent?)

In the individual and group interviews as well as the whole class discussions, there were no preset questions as they emerged in the interaction. Nevertheless, the focus was always on assessing the experience in terms of motivation and language

learning. The interviews and discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. All the participating teachers and learners signed a consent form in which the research was described. It was agreed that data would only be obtained through self-reporting and that we would not have access to the learners' work for analysis. They also received assurances of confidentiality and anonymity and were informed that withdrawal from the study would not affect their rights.

Data were examined through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Silverman, 2020). This was an iterative process which entailed reading and rereading the transcriptions to identify initial codes. Once the findings were synthesized by means of axial coding and unifying themes, we reanalyzed the data to ensure consistency, confirmability, and transparency. A colleague not involved in the project acted as a second analyst of 40% of the data collected. Discrepancies between the coders were solved through revisiting the data and codes until we reached an inter-rater agreement of 90%, a figure we considered acceptable.

4. Findings

This section is organized following the evaluation stages of Cycles 1 and 2 respectively. Figure 1 shows the axial codes (small circles) and their links to the overarching and interconnected themes (large circle). In describing the findings, all the data sources from the teachers and their learners were employed.



Figure 1 Emerging themes

4.1. Cycle 1 evaluation

Since motivation and engagement are at the core of this paper, four themes were identified: (1) increase in attention and participation, (2) learner-focused teachers' practices, (3) creative writing for publication as an authentic activity for self-expression, and (4) language development in terms of cohesion and coherence. Both the teachers and the learners perceived an increase in each other's attention and participation. This is particularly revealing for the teachers as they realized that everyone had undergone similar changes in attitude and engagement. The teachers expressed:

This has been quite something. The learners slowly moved from not caring much about anything and minding their own business to actually listening to me. Imagine my happiness. By the end of the term I could see that most of them were showing with their bodies that they were listening, that they were paying attention when I'd explain something about the features of a short story or a poem. (Beatriz, Extract 1)

They became more participatory in class. Like more engaged in the lesson. Of course, this doesn't include everyone in the classroom. But you could mostly see students paying attention or actually participating by raising their hands to answer a question, or just volunteering to come to the board or read something out they had written themselves. Before, they wouldn't dare to say a thing for fear of being ridiculed, but then they started to participate as they found that almost everyone found the activities "cool." (Cecilia, Extract 2)

In-class participation also increased among most of the learners. However, the teachers stressed the procedural nature of the change, explaining that learners moved from indifference to attention to participation. The latter, in the teachers' eyes, entailed learners challenging negative peer pressure as the creative writing activities began to be accepted.

Learners' appreciation of the teachers' increasing attention and participation could be observed through learners' observations of improvement in teachers' practices. The extracts below, coming from one learner from each class, show that their L2 learning experiences were enhanced. Hence, L2 learning experiences became a source of motivation and engagement due to changes in their teachers' practices. In Andrea's class, when the first author asked whether her lessons had become less coursebook-driven, 25 learners raised their hands. Thus, it seems that she moved from being a coursebook deliverer to a teacher who could exercise creativity and feel motivated by her own practices. For example, a learner explained:

She didn't follow the coursebook so much when we started with this project. As we wrote about what we liked, she paid more attention to our questions and she taught

in a way that was more original. Like she would bring so many activities to read poems or comics, or she would bring us a comic with blank speech bubbles and that was wonderful. She seemed enthused in her own teaching. (Mariano, Extract 3)

It should also be noted that *attention* was connected to Andrea listening actively and adapting her lessons to meet the learners' needs.

In the case of Beatriz and Cecilia, 49 learners out of 59 raised their hands to indicate that their teachers' feedback practices changed. The learners elaborated that feedback was more detailed, and focused on meaning, form, and style. As one learner put it,

Cecilia's feedback is different now and I like it. I like it because she walks around the classroom more often providing feedback. And she reads the paragraphs with us and she gives us suggestions for meaning, so that it's clearer what we want to say. She still corrects if something is wrong but it's like I understand more, like I pay more attention because what she tells me is to improve my own writing. (Renata, Extract 4)

In Extract 4, the relationship between teacher feedback and learner attention is explicit as the teacher's suggestions are meant to strengthen the learner's own creative process.

Lastly, when asked whether the lessons had become learner-centered, 71 learners out of 89 confirmed this change. For example, one of Cecilia's students said:

You could tell that she was enjoying the lesson. She seemed engaged in the activities she had designed. And it wasn't her talking all the time. We had more time for individual or pair work, or even group work, and we had more room for participation, for thinking and for answering a question or sharing a comment. It wasn't her teaching all the time. It was us learning. (Karina, Extract 5)

Through this unique experience, the teachers seemed to have shifted from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach. Two additional changes were observed: a reduction in teacher talking time and an increase in learner talking time, and the provision of learners' thinking time. In Cycle 1, the L2 learning experience was influenced by how the teachers adjusted their practices to accommodate the creative writing for publication project. In line with the literature (e.g., Ahlquist, 2019; Terada, 2019), the learners highlighted changes in agency, creativity, feedback, engagement, and a focus on learners and learning as opposed to teacher-fronted lesson delivery.

The theme of creative writing for publication as an authentic activity for self-expression was appealing to the three classes. In total, 78 learners out of 89 agreed with this, as it mirrored what some of them would do in Spanish (L1):

I like these activities and the chance that we can write a poem or a story about what matters to me as a person, my feelings, or my concerns about the environment, for example. It's what I sometimes do in Spanish. I write things I don't show to anyone, or things I post on Instagram. (Julieta, Extract 6)

To a lesser extent, the publication potential of the project enabled 29 learners out of 89 to see creative writing as an authentic activity. Of those learners, 21 confirmed that they would share their own creative writing pieces or reflections (both instances of self-expression) in Spanish on social media, a space for sharing aspects of the self with a genuine audience. However, the possibility of having their pieces included in an e-book became a serious endeavor. For example, one learner said:

I feel driven to write these stories I've got in my head and even think of some illustrations to go with them because they might be published for real. It's not like I post a story myself on Twitter. Now it's authentic because it might be included in an official e-book. So there are other people involved taking care of our texts. (Ignacio, Extract 7)

Thus, Extracts 6 and 7 confirm that creative writing for publication was an authentic activity because the learners could express themselves about topics, feelings, and ideas that derived from their selves.

The last theme, language development in terms of cohesion and coherence, is solely based on self-reported responses and did not include our analysis of learners' drafts. In this regard, we trusted the learners' perceptions and the teachers' professional judgment and agency in assessing their learners' work. Data from the teachers and the learners reveal that they perceived progress at the levels of cohesion and coherence. For example, Beatriz explained:

With every draft or activity the students paid more attention to coming across as clear and orderly. It's also true that my feedback also pointed out issues with coherence and cohesion, how to reorganize phrases or sentences to make the text easier to understand. It's also true that they improved in cohesion and coherence because of the genre approach we used. We worked with different texts and they had to identify features. I think that making them aware of a whole text and the writer's intention and the potential presence of a genuine reader made them pay more attention to those aspects. (Beatriz, Extract 8)

Beatriz's explanation also shows that teacher feedback and a genre-based approach were the factors that enhanced coherence and cohesion in learners' writing. Extract 8 illustrates that because creative writing became a genuine and authentic activity, priority was given to meaning and form at textual level. Despite perceived development in coherence and cohesion, accuracy or lexical growth were not enhanced. For example, in the group interview, Andrea noted:

Yes, they got better at textual organization but they still had problems with simple past, or sentence structure, or spelling, let alone punctuation! And even when they learnt new words or phrases, they wouldn't use them in later drafts. (Andrea, Extract 9)

One potential reason for this might be learners' concern with expressing their ideas rather than accuracy.

During the whole class discussions, 67 learners out of 89 self-perceived improvement in their English language development. They confirmed progress in textual organization but acknowledged they still made grammatical errors and failed to enlarge their lexicon. A learner explained:

In my case, I think I improved at writing longer sentences with more phrases. I think I could do this because, compared to other writing tasks we've done, now I had something meaningful to say. These lines talk about who I am. And so, I also became more organized, like I paid attention to writing longer sentences and arranging them in a way that was clear. And I also took every comment made by the teacher because I wanted to be a strong Lourdes through my writing. (Lourdes, Extract 10)

Lourdes' explanation for her self-perceived English language development is the result of creative writing being considered an activity for personal expression and identity construction. Her interest in English language proficiency at textual and sentence levels was driven by the realization that self-perception and others' perception of her was connected not only to the content of her creative pieces but also to her performance as an L2 writer. In this case, the project empowered Lourdes to resignify her L2 learning experience concomitant with her L2 writing self.

In conclusion, Cycle 1 shows that the experience proved to activate motivation and engagement among learners and teachers. As in previous studies (e.g., Henry & Thorsten, 2018), the learners found creative writing motivating as it was primarily constructed through personal expression and meaning. It should be clarified that even when authenticity of audience was viewed as a distinctive and motivating factor, it did not feature strongly across the data sets. However, this theme was to undergo a major change in Cycle 2.

4.2. Cycle 2 evaluation

Although Cycle 2 unfolded over almost a whole school year, there were fewer lessons than in Cycle 1 as schools were closed due to social unrest. Data collected before June 2019 did not show any changes as compared to Cycle 1. Nevertheless, the publication and free distribution of the first volume of *Chubut escribe en inglés*¹ at

¹ The e-book can be downloaded from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-TQ6pASkOBBYewkGhIsbpNI1usoxVd8e/view?usp=sharing>

the end of June 2019 marked a significant shift. As part of the project, the three teachers developed activities based on the creative pieces written by learners other than their own.

During the evaluation stage, three themes were identified: (1) writing for publication as a drive for language learning engagement, (2) developing a new identity as L2 creative writers, and (3) development of language awareness, accuracy, and lexical repertoire. It should be clarified that the theme of teachers' practices was also identified but the data did not reveal new insights in comparison to Cycle 1.

Unlike Cycle 1, by raising their hands, 70 learners out of 89 confirmed that writing for publication was an authentic activity that drove them to engage in English language learning. They then explained that seeing creative pieces authored by themselves, peers, and other teenage learners from the province increased their participation in class. One learner said:

When we first answered questions reflecting on a comic about water pollution written by a learner from another city, I couldn't believe the whole project was true. It was real, writing our stories became so real, they were here published! So I felt like I wanted to participate in class. I did participate a lot more. I wanted to read and learn with these stories because they had been written by kids like us, about topics I could relate to. The writer was real, the text was real, and I was real too learning with these stories too. (Francisco, Extract 11)

In Extract 11, language learning engagement, which Francisco saw as different from motivation, was the result of several dimensions connected to authenticity (Pinner, 2019): authenticity of task (reflective questions), authenticity of input (the comic strip), authenticity of content (water pollution), authenticity of author (a teenage writer based in another city), and authenticity of audience (Francisco himself). These dimensions cemented the positive effects of the L2 learning experience.

However, five learners pointed out that even though the activities based on the e-book were motivating and engaging, they still felt that the texts were not genuine as they had been written by other English language learners. For example, Martina explained:

It's great we read stories from people like us. But they're not stories written by American or English teenagers. I mean, the e-book is OK, but it's not truly real. I think I prefer stories as we did last year because the English there was real as they had been written by people who speak English as we do Spanish. (Martina, Extract 12)

Martina's comment reflects concerns about the value and genuineness of stories written by peers. In her words, traces of the tensions between those categorized as native and non-native speakers are present. According to Martina, only creative

pieces authored by so-called native speakers provide natural and high-quality instantiations of English use. Albeit critical, this theme (see Martínez Agudo, 2017) exceeds the scope of this paper.

The second theme, that is, developing new identities as L2 creative writers, emerged among those learners who had either identified themselves as interested in writing creatively in Spanish ($N = 21$) or those who found creative writing engaging. They agreed that the project framed those involved in the e-book not just as L2 learners, but also as L2 creative writers. For example, a learner whose poem had been included in the e-book explained:

Seeing my own poem published is just epic. I am part of a collection that other learners might be reading today. The experience has shown me that we can also be writers in English. Of course, we need to learn English more and avoid making mistakes. So now, I feel like I can write poems both in English and Spanish. (Antonio, Extract 13)

Antonio's words indicate that the learners may have found themselves developing a self they had not necessarily imagined. They also reveal that writing for publication may enable learners to develop different related writing selves as they can also develop an identity as L1 creative writers due to the experience of writing in an L2.

Last, the theme of development of language awareness, accuracy, and lexical repertoire was identified in self-reported responses. The teachers and learners agreed that seeing and working with the e-book enabled many learners to develop their English language proficiency to different extents. For example, Andrea said:

Across the three classes we have noted that they now pay attention to language use and ask us questions about when or how a phrase is used. And because they are more aware of their own language use, they invest more time in proofreading, and editing, and finding and using new words to be more acute about what they want to mean. We're sure they notice their improvement, and because they're aware of their better performance, they feel motivated to sustain that performance. (Andrea, Extract 14)

In sum, Cycle 2, particularly after the e-book had been incorporated as a learning material, enhanced language learning motivation, engagement, and English development as both writers and readers were perceived as genuine and influential in the L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2019; Rojas Alvarez, 2011).

5. Discussion

The first research question sought to determine whether creative writing for publication could enhance secondary school teenage learners' language learning motivation and engagement. As illustrated in the findings, the experience of

involving teenage learners as authors of English-medium creative pieces exerted a positive influence on their language learning motivation and experience. In the context of the study, from a relational view of motivation (Ushioda, 2013), the initiative proved to be an influential motivating factor.

As noted by the learners and teachers, the learners moved from demotivation to motivation, observable through learner attention (Extract 1), and from motivation to, as Dörnyei (2019) and Norton (2020) discuss, engagement, observable through active in-class participation (Extracts 2 and 11). However, the novelty of the creative writing for publication initiative did not only become motivating and engaging for the learners. The teachers also experienced a surge in their motivation and engagement in the classroom and with their learners as they developed learner-centered pedagogies and created a conducive learning environment. Thus, a positive change in the learners' L2 self system (Dörnyei, 2009) benefited both learners and teachers in synergy (Pinner, 2019).

The overall initiative ignited motivation and engagement among the learners as they valued three elements contained in it (e.g., Extracts 6, 7, and 12): (1) authenticity of task, content, and audience (Pinner, 2016; Rojas Alvarez, 2011), (2) opportunity for self-expression (Guzmán Gámez & Moreno Cuellar, 2019; Henry & Thorsten, 2018) and identity (Zhao, 2014), and (3) imagination (Ahlquist, 2013, 2019). The initiative occurred within English as a mandatory subject in Argentinian secondary education, and therefore it had a positive impact on the overall learners' L2 learning experience.

The second research question aimed at examining what aspects of the L2 learning experience contributed to learner motivation and engagement. As mentioned above, the initiative itself became a source of motivation and engagement. Drawing on Dörnyei's (2019) definition of the L2 learning experience as part of the L2 motivational self system, the creative writing for publication project provided English language learning in secondary education with learner-centered and authentic tasks, topics, and audience. This was possible due to the teachers' commitment. The project provided learners with an L2 learning experience where the teachers developed agency to create original lessons centered on the learners' interests and needs. Teachers' changing practices translated into allowing learners to become the center of the lesson and to be given time to think and work individually and collaboratively. The teachers also engaged in feedback practices which concentrated on meaning, form, and style. In addition, the teaching and learning processes became not only less coursebook-dependent but also driven by creative writing pieces either written by international authors or the learners.

The teaching approach employed for the project, that is, a combination of genre theory and process writing, enabled the learners to improve their English language proficiency in terms of form (textual and sentential) and meaning as

in previous studies in affluent contexts (Ahlquist, 2019). We therefore understand the experience as a case of synergy where the project-enhanced L2 learning experience brought about learner motivation and engagement, which in turn, had a positive effect on their linguistic performance. As the learners became aware of their progress, self-perceived English language development contributed to the motivation and engagement underpinned by the L2 learning experience. Thus, the aspects that made the L2 learning experience both a source of motivation and engagement could be summarized as follows: (1) authentic and learner-responsive initiative, (2) teacher agency, (3) teacher feedback, (4) genre-based and process writing-based approach, and (5) learners' English language development. These features not only confirm the findings reviewed in the literature, but also help understand the relationship among motivation, engagement, and authenticity by enabling learners to assume agency as L2 materials developers in the L2 learning experience.

6. Pedagogical implications

In action research projects, the main aim is to identify pedagogical innovations which can be drawn from the results (Burns, 2005). Therefore, we would like to highlight these briefly in the case of the present investigation.

The first major implication of Cycle 1 was the importance of teachers providing formative feedback on the students' writing, offering more personalized support, and individually reviewing the written drafts with the students in class. The data from Cycle 1 clearly showed that the process of teachers providing support and meaning-focused feedback was motivating for the students, as they indicated that the class had become more learner-centered, and that their level of attention and understanding increased. Rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy, the teachers allowed the students to write their stories, and then provided feedback on the content first and on the form next. This meaning-focused approach appears to have resonated with the students' motivational selves (Dörnyei, 2009), as they were able to express their ideas clearly, and thus presented an authentic self through their writing.

The second major implication was the creative focus of the writing, and the possibility of the work being published. These points were cited by significant numbers of students as being motivating and making them feel committed to expressing their ideas. In Cycle 2, the main pedagogical innovation concerned the use of the e-book produced at the end of Cycle 1. The learners were able to use this as a motivational goal, and this encouraged them to express their ideas through their writing. Alongside the continuation of the interventions implemented in Cycle 1, this external motivating factor in Cycle 2 appears to have

acted as a catalyst for the students to engage with creative writing on a deeper and more personal level (Guzmán & Moreno Cuellar, 2019; Norton, 2020). For educators in other contexts, the two key takeaways for the implementation of similar projects would seem to be that teachers may wish to focus primarily on meaning in their feedback, with form coming later, and secondly that some kind of external motivating factor (such as the e-book publication in this project) can be utilized to engage and motivate learners to express themselves.

7. Conclusion

Inspired by Lamb's (2017) call for studies based in contexts where English as a foreign language is mandatory, the study lends support to the necessity of imbuing L2 learning experiences with authentic, learner-centered, and context-responsive initiatives. Both learners and teachers played a pivotal role in making the experience a success. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations. The AR project did not involve classroom observations and individual interviews with the learners. Therefore, triangulation is an issue in the research methodology. Second, the whole class discussions were led by the first author and the teachers. Thus, the teachers' presence may have inhibited learners from making negative comments about teachers' practices. Similarly, the fact that the first author, in his dual identity as researcher and curriculum developer, carried out the interviews with the teachers may have discouraged them from making negative comments about the overall initiative. Last, learners' English language development was solely understood from the perspective of learners' self-reporting and teachers' report of learners' work. The study did not include our own analysis of learners' drafts over both cycles. Despite these reservations, the article may be regarded as a fair response to the gaps mentioned in the Introduction and to Dörnyei's (2019) call for studies which shed light on the L2 learning experience of the L2 motivational self system, in our case, among learners taking mandatory classes. Future research may examine the effect that learners writing for publication may have on teachers' continuing professional development. Research should also examine the initiative from the teachers' perspective to understand the affordances and challenges they may face. Last, as noted in Extract 12, studies could also examine teachers' and learners' views of native and non-native writers of English as authors and their pieces as pedagogical input.

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