



Motivating factors in online language teacher education in southern Argentina



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ABSTRACT

Online teacher education is of growing interest and so is the study of motivation as a key factor in technology-mediated learning environments. This study is based on a pre-service language teacher education programme in Patagonia, a southern Argentinian region with no face-to-face training offers, limited Internet access and a large number of unqualified teachers. Our goal is to broaden the understanding of online teacher education programmes at undergraduate level in contexts where most trainees are practicing teachers and where online education is the only possibility for holding a teaching qualification. We focused on the motivating factors that led 71 trainees to enrol and to remain in this online teacher training course. Through a mixed methods approach, the trainees completed an online survey ($n = 71$) and participated in a follow-up interview ($n = 24$). Results showed that obtaining a teaching degree, autonomy, and individual activities were key factors in initial and sustaining motivation. Participants' experiences challenged collaborative learning in an online environment.

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1. Introduction

As Simpson (2012, p. 1) puts it, “[o]nline and distance education is very likely the fastest growing area of education in the world today, in both the developed and developing worlds.” In language education, White and Ding (2009) observe that the occurrence of substantial developments in language teaching is the product of technological advances on access and configuration of language learning opportunities (see Dudeney, Hockly, & Pegrum, 2013; Walker & White, 2013). Online courses defined as “web-facilitated, hybrid, or totally virtual” courses (Blake, 2011, p. 19) may be placed along a cline from pure f2f (face-to-face) to non f2f-delivery and are found in language learning and language teacher education. They stimulate students to increase exposure and engagement but this requires maintaining their motivation (Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner, & Heiner, 2011).

Online teacher education programmes are encouraged by the growth of Web 2.0 applications (see Brown, 2010; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011). In such programmes, (future) teachers can experience the integration of ICT in their classrooms by developing new skills under the light of their beliefs and knowledge of teaching and technology (see Chai & Lim, 2011; Horzum, 2013; Kim, Kim, Lee, Spector, & DeMeester, 2013; Koc, 2013; Mouza, Karchmer-Klein, Nandakumar, Ozden, & Hu, 2014; Starkey, 2011).

Our investigation centred on an online initial English language teacher education programme in southern Argentina. In this vast region, different tertiary institutions and universities offer around nine f2f language teacher education courses.¹ However there is only one online English language teacher education programme. This opportunity emerged as a response to unqualified practicing teachers in need of a teaching degree and people interested in pursuing English language teaching (ELT) who could not afford to move to cities where f2f courses were located.

We, the two authors of this study and tutors at this online programme, became interested in investigating trainees' motivating factors to enrol and remain in it. From a dynamic and processual view of motivation (Ushioda, 2009), we sought to understand initial motivation and sustaining motivation. To this effect, we examined motivating factors such as autonomy, f2f and distance collaborative learning, future

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¹ Source: <http://www.faapi.org.ar/informacion/formacion-profesional/>.

selves, extrinsic and instrumental drives, trainees' perception of their performance, and course materials, online platform, and course status. Data were collected over the 2013 academic year and our research instruments were an online survey and a follow-up interview through Skype.

We consider that our study is significant at a local level and a wider level. To our knowledge, studies on motivation in language teacher education in Argentina have a tendency to examine an f2f-delivery mode (see [Anglada & Banegas, 2012](#)). Our study is the first attempt to study motivation in online teacher education through quantitative and qualitative data. At a wider level, we believe that our findings may contribute to understanding the interrelationships between motivation, autonomy, and online education without positioning collaborative learning as an inherent benefit.

2. Literature review

Motivation and language education is an inescapable relationship captured in different paradigms (see [Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011](#); [Piggot, 2012](#); [Ushioda, 2011, 2012](#)) and, consequently, research reports based on diverse settings (see [Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009](#); [Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011](#); [Ushioda, 2013a](#)). While the literature is rich on language learner motivation, studies on teacher motivation and motivation in language teacher education (for example see [Hiver, 2013](#); [Kumazawa, 2013](#)), whatever the delivery mode, are needed.

The literature offers substantial contributions in the area of online learning and teacher education in relation to tools such as blogs ([Cakir, 2013](#); [Compton, 2009](#); [Fisher & Kim, 2013](#)), and e-assessment ([Green et al., 2010](#); [Hung, 2012](#)). The interdependence between motivation and technology in online teacher education has also been the object of contributions which compare f2f and online teacher education (see [Eshet, Grinautski, & Peled, 2012](#); [Hartnett et al., 2011](#); [Kirtman, 2009](#); [Stockwell, 2013](#)). Drawing on quantitative studies with limited data and factors, these authors agree that collaborative learning and interaction are motivating factors in both f2f and online modes. They also indicate that intrinsic as well as extrinsic types of motivation coexist in both modes. However, while the f2f mode is more motivating in terms of instant feedback and support, the online mode is motivating in terms of autonomy, individual forms of learning, and online interaction.

According to the literature, online teacher education is driven by interrelated motivating factors such as interaction with tutors and students through different webtools, accessibility, and autonomy. Below, we address these factors in detail.

Interaction and its impact on motivation has been the object of mixed method ([Murphy, Shelley, White, & Baumann, 2011](#)) and qualitative ([Xiao, 2012](#)) studies, reviews ([Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011](#)) and reflective accounts ([Legg & Knox, 2012](#)). One recurrent aspect in these contributions is tutors' motivating characteristics and roles. They are seen as motivators, facilitators and empowerers, and personal characteristics such as being committed, approachable, empathetic, accepting, humble, and egalitarian appear as motivating ([Xiao, 2012](#)). In this tutor–student interaction, personalised feedback ([Nunan, 2012](#)) even when it is not immediate is also seen as motivating.

As regards interaction and online tools, a conference on motivation and autonomy in ELT held in Argentina (see [Anglada & Banegas, 2012](#)) discussed the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and virtual classrooms ([Braun, Cheme Arriaga, & Monserrat, 2012](#); [Cardozo & Orta González, 2012](#); [Castro & Leceta, 2012](#); also [Bonadeo, 2013](#)), Facebook closed groups ([Massi, Verdú, & Scilipoti, 2012](#)) as means to motivate trainees in f2f language teacher education programmes. As [DelliCarpini \(2012, p. 15\)](#) puts it, “[t]eacher education programs are not immune to the call for the integration of technology into curriculum and many have developed coursework that addresses this issue”. However, [Stockwell \(2013\)](#) warns that technology does not always result in automatic motivation increases as it depends on skills and availability.

Technology availability is linked to accessibility. Authors agree that accessibility is the main motivating characteristic because it is envisaged as an opportunity for autonomy and individual learning styles. Accessibility in time and place allows students, some of whom are practicing teachers, to study autonomously and remain employed and seek upward mobility ([Young & Lewis, 2008](#)). Access in time is related to the asynchronicity of online courses. Based on her implementation and investigation of a short online course for trainees, [Gakonga \(2012\)](#) concluded that asynchronous learning gives trainees time to organise, prepare, and deliver their answers, and ask questions. Yet, time is assessed also as a drawback since online education can become time consuming ([Nunan, 2012](#)) and “[l]earners are faced with (...) greater demands for self-organization” ([Charlier, 2011, p. 237](#)). [Gabriel \(2004\)](#) investigated the impact of collaborative learning and the social construction of knowledge among eight participating students and two instructors through a web-based Master in Education programme. While participants reported learning more quickly from and with others, they stressed that the programme was time consuming as they needed to check forum posts for participation and new materials continually.

[Simpson \(2012\)](#) states that accessibility is not only physical but also psychological and social. Psychological accessibility is linked to isolation as it could help reduce anxiety ([Simpson, 2012](#)). According to [Gakonga \(2012\)](#), less confident learners may contribute without fear of losing face and emailing tutors seems less intimidating than asking a question face-to-face. However, [Nunan \(2012\)](#) views isolation as a threat. Similar concerns are raised in [O'Bannon, Lubke, and Britt \(2013\)](#). Their study involved 78 pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a core technology course focused on wiki technology. The participants reported comfort with the software and valued how wiki promoted collaboration. However, their poor participation responded to the fact that they did not know their peers and wished there had been a stronger f2f element in the course.

As a response to isolation and framed in social accessibility, wider communities of practice can be developed through webtools to interact with international students and top professionals ([Nunan, 2012](#)). Interactive accessibility may be achieved through online forums. Nevertheless, the quality of interaction depends on technological development and tutors' moderating skills (for tutoring at a distance see [Bertin & Narcy-Combes, 2012](#)). [Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang \(2003\)](#) indicate that some online asynchronous forum participation (see [Loncar, Barrett, & Liu, 2014](#)) in in-service teacher education programmes is like serial monologues, that is, “discussions in which participants share past teaching experiences and freely express their opinions with minimal effort made to connect to the contributions of others” (p. 119). These authors examined online discussions from three online graduate-level language teacher education courses from a U.S. university and found that most participants illustrated serial monologues. They would present their positions on a given topic but there would be no enquiry or discussions following up on the posts made. In a study with online learners of Spanish, [Comas-Quinn, de los Arcos, and Mardomingo \(2012, p. 141\)](#) found that tutors' initiated forums were “made redundant by the use of other channels of communication between tutors and the students in their group.”

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