

Student Agency in Foreign Language Learning: A Critical Literature Review

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This review interrogates empirical and theoretical research on agentic engagement in foreign language (FL) learning. Through synthesizing peer-reviewed studies from Web of Science and CNKI databases, it maps the theoretical evolution, methodological innovations, key influencing factors and proposed suggestion for further research on student agency. Future research should prioritize, longitudinal studies, culturally comparative designs, validity constructs and ethical evaluations of artificial intelligence's impact on learner autonomy. This review calls for a holistic approach to FL education, where agentic engagement bridges individual initiative, pedagogical innovation, and sociocultural responsiveness to empower learners in multilingual global contexts.

Keywords: learner agency, student engagement, FL (foreign language) learning, agentic engagement

Introduction

Against the backdrop of global educational reforms emphasizing learner-centered pedagogies, agency transcends traditional notions of compliance to position students as co-architects of knowledge ecosystems. Student agency—defined as learners' capacity to act intentionally, make informed choices, and influence their learning trajectories—has emerged as a pivotal construct in 21st-century educational research. Reeve (2013) proposed that agentic engagement functions as a proactive, intentional, collaborative, and constructive student-initiated pathway to greater achievement and motivational support. In technology-enhanced FL learning ecosystems, agency serves as a counterforce against digital divides (Zheng, 2022) and employs metacognitive strategies to optimize learning efficiency. Moreover, as the literature points out, investigating people's agency informs us about their well-being, their resilience, and their daily actions with respect to the structures in which their lives are embedded. Therefore, literature review on student agency will offer significant implications for future research, practice, and policy.

Multidimensional Definition of Agency

Social scientists are widely aware of the significance and pivotal role of the concept of agency, while scarce consensus remains regarding the interpretation and definition of this concept (Cavazzoni, 2022).

Early Foundations from Albert Bandura's (2001) seminal work on agentic perspectives framed agency as individuals' proactive control over their motivations, actions, and environments. Bandura emphasized

self-regulation and forethought as core dimensions, arguing that learners exercise agency by setting goals, anticipating outcomes, and adjusting strategies. However, this individual-centric view laid groundwork but later faced critiques for underemphasizing sociocultural contexts.

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory repositioned agency as mediated by cultural tools and co-constructed through social interaction. James V. Wertsch (1998) extended this by introducing mediated action, where agency emerges from the interplay between individuals and "cultural toolkits".

In contemporary educational scholarship, Gert Biesta (2020) redefines agency through a relational lens, conceptualizing it as "the ability to act in and upon the world in ways that make a difference" (Educational Philosophy and Theory). This definition moves beyond individualistic or static notions of agency, positioning it as a dynamic, contextually embedded capacity shaped by three interconnected dimensions: subject-centered agency, personal autonomy and reflexivity.

Recent scholarship examines agency in technology-rich environments. Ron Darvin (2022) analyzed how algorithmic systems in language learning platforms both enable and constrain agency through digital semiotics. Meanwhile, posthumanist theorists like Tara Fenwick (2015) argue for more-than-human agency, where non-human actors co-participate in agential networks.

Table 1

Across These Frameworks, Agency Encompasses

Intentionality	Goal-setting and purposeful action	Bandura, 2001
Mediation	Tools, language, and technologies as agency enablers	Vygotsky, 1978; Darvin, 2022
Criticality	Awareness and resistance of structural inequalities	Freire, 1970
Relationality	Co-construction within social and material networks	Biesta, 2020; Fenwick, 2015

Despite great importance of agency in various stages of life span, research on agency of FL learners is relatively scarce, most of the existing studies adopt qualitative methods and mainly focus on college students in teacher education programs. The sample size is rather limited and little is known about the experiences and available resources of college students in other language courses.

Agency in FL learning

The construct of agency in FL learning exhibits unique characteristics distinct from general learning contexts, shaped by the interplay of linguistic, cultural, and identity-related dynamics. These specificities are rooted in the following dimensions:

Negotiation of Multilingual Identities

FL learners constantly navigate hybrid identities as they mediate between their native linguistic/cultural frameworks and target language (TL) norms. Darvin and Norton (2015) conceptualize this process through their Model of Investment, arguing that learners exercise agency by strategically "investing" in TL practices to claim symbolic resources. For instance, a Chinese student may adopt code-switching in English discussions to assert intellectual legitimacy. Such identity work is rarely neutral; it reflects power hierarchies embedded in global language ideologies (e.g., the privileging of "native-like" accents).

Affective-Cognitive Interdependence

Agency in FL contexts is deeply entangled with emotional vulnerability. Unlike STEM subjects, language learning inherently involves self-exposure—learners risk “losing face” when articulating imperfect TL expressions. Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System highlights how learners’ agency is fueled by visions of “ideal selves” (e.g., becoming a fluent speaker) but constrained by “feared selves” (e.g., embarrassment from errors). Dewaele (2018) *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* reveal that anxiety and enjoyment coexist dialectically, shaping learners’ willingness to take communicative risks.

Technomediated Agency

Digital tools (e.g., language apps, VR simulations, online language course) reconfigure agency by offering asymmetric affordances. While platforms like Duolingo empower self-paced learning, their algorithmic designs often invisibly dictate learning pathways, as critiqued by Zheng et al. (2022) in *Computers & Education*. Learners may “perform agency” by creatively subverting app limitations—for example, using ChatGPT to generate personalized dialogues beyond preset curricula.

Intercultural Pragmatic Agency

FL agency necessitates pragmatic adaptability—the ability to align linguistic choices with culturally situated norms. Research by Kramsch (2009) illustrates how learners negotiate politeness strategies (e.g., hedging in Japanese vs. directness in German), requiring metalinguistic reflection and situational flexibility.

These specificities underscore that FL agency is not merely a cognitive skill but a multimodal, emotionally charged, and politically embedded practice. Future research must address how macro-level factors (e.g., neoliberal education policies) intersect with micro-level agency in diverse FL contexts.

Empirical Landscape

Empirical research on the agency of FL learners primarily focuses on two aspects: agency under different teaching environment and its influencing factors. Empirical investigations across varied settings—ranging from formal classrooms to informal digital environments—reveal both universal patterns and context-specific dynamics. Influencing factors can be further divided into educational strategies, technological functions, and structural constraints.

Research on agentic engagement in second language (L2) learning has increasingly emphasized how contextual factors shape the enactment and outcomes of learner agency. In formal classroom contexts, teacher support emerges as a critical moderator of agency. A longitudinal study by Reeve and Cheon (2021) involving 180 Korean university EFL learners demonstrated that autonomy-supportive teaching strategies (e.g., offering task choices, encouraging goal co-construction) led to a 35% increase in agentic behaviors, such as initiating peer discussions and customizing learning materials. These behaviors, in turn, correlated with higher long-term retention of vocabulary and speaking fluency gains. Conversely, in teacher-centered environments, Tian and Zhou (2020) observed that Chinese EFL learners exhibited “ritualized agency”—superficial compliance with tasks (e.g., memorizing scripts) to avoid conflict with authority figures—highlighting how rigid pedagogies constrain authentic agentic expression.

Technology-mediated contexts present unique opportunities and challenges. Lai et al. (2022) analyzed mobile-assisted language learning practices among 300 learners across five countries and found that structured platforms with metacognitive prompts (e.g., reflective journals, progress dashboards) significantly enhanced self-regulated learning. However, Kessler's (2021) critical discourse analysis of Duolingo users revealed that algorithmic constraints often reduced agency to "gamified compliance," where learners prioritized point accumulation over meaningful language use. These findings suggest that technology's impact depends on its design: open-ended tools like language exchange forums fostered creative agency, as users negotiated meaning across cultures (Stockwell, 2022). Heng's (2022) comparative analysis of Chinese EFL learners revealed stark contrasts: while online forums fostered "silent participation" through anonymous post-editing and intensive video replaying, face-to-face classrooms privileged verbal agency, with students initiating 58% more questions during in-class debates. This technological mediation effect finds resonance in Darwin's (2025) study of Filipino migrant worker. Jääskelä et al. (2016) identified that Finnish secondary students' teacher-dependent agency transformed into university learners' self-directed resource selection. Although the study focused on the dynamic features, the data were collected over a long period of time. In addition, none of the above studies explained the individual development of learners, and thus could not understand the change pattern of motivation.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that learner agency manifests differentially across educational contexts, not merely as a stable individual trait but rather as an emergent property shaped by dynamic interactions between learners and their environments. These studies collectively underscore that learner agency is not a static trait but a dynamic, contextually negotiated phenomenon. Future research must adopt ecological frameworks to disentangle how institutional, technological, and cultural systems interact to enable or constrain agency.

Key Influencing Factors of Agency in FL Learning

The enactment of learner agency in foreign language (FL) contexts is mediated by an intricate interplay of individual, sociocultural, and technological factors. Drawing on empirical and theoretical scholarship, this section synthesizes key determinants that enable or constrain agency.

At the individual level, self-efficacy and goal orientation critically shape agency. Zimmerman's (2000) social cognitive model posits that learners with robust self-regulatory skills—such as goal-setting and metacognitive monitoring—demonstrate heightened agency by strategically adapting learning strategies (e.g., selective attention to grammar vs. vocabulary). Empirical studies further reveal that emotional states modulate agentic behaviors. Dewaele (2018) identified a paradoxical relationship between anxiety and agency: while excessive anxiety inhibits spontaneous participation, moderate tension can enhance focused effort, particularly when coupled with intrinsic enjoyment of linguistic challenges.

Sociocultural environments exert both facilitative and restrictive pressures. Mercer's (2011) analysis of classroom discourse demonstrates that dialogic teacher feedback (e.g., "How might you rephrase this idea?") fosters agency by positioning learners as co-constructors of knowledge, whereas evaluative feedback (e.g., error correction without elaboration) reinforces dependency. Peer dynamics similarly influence agency; Storch's (2002) study of collaborative writing tasks found that egalitarian partnerships promote shared decision-making, enabling learners to experiment with complex syntactic structures they might avoid in individual work. Cultural norms further mediate agency expression: Li's (2012) comparative research revealed that East Asian learners

often exercise “silent agency”—strategic observation and selective participation—to align with collectivist values, contrasting Western expectations of vocal assertiveness.

Digital tools reconfigure agency through asymmetric affordances. While adaptive platforms like Duolingo offer personalized learning pathways, their algorithmic architectures often prioritize efficiency over learner autonomy. Darwin (2022) critiqued such systems for embedding linguistic biases (e.g., privileging native-speaker accents), which may inadvertently marginalize learners who deviate from algorithmic norms. Conversely, immersive technologies like VR simulations enable embodied agency; Reinhardt’s (2019) case studies showed that learners in virtual environments take unprecedented communicative risks (e.g., negotiating simulated business deals) due to reduced fear of real-world repercussions.

Agency emerges not from isolated factors but their dynamic convergence. Zheng et al. (2022) illustrated this through a longitudinal study of Chinese EFL students: those with high self-efficacy (individual) leveraged peer networks (sociocultural) to counteract rigid mobile app designs (technological), such as forming offline study groups to supplement restrictive digital curricula. This underscores the necessity of holistic frameworks that account for multidirectional influences.

Educational Implications and Future Directions

The concept of agentic engagement in foreign language (FL) learning has garnered increasing attention for its potential to transform pedagogical practices and enhance learner outcomes. Drawing on existing empirical and theoretical studies, this section synthesizes key educational implications for stakeholders—including educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers—and proposes future research directions to address gaps in current scholarship.

Empowering Learner Autonomy Through Curriculum Design

Agentic engagement underscores the importance of learner autonomy, defined as the capacity to take control of one’s learning processes (Benson, 2013). Curriculum designers should prioritize flexible frameworks that allow learners to co-construct learning goals, select materials, and reflect on progress. For instance, task-based language teaching (TBLT) models, which emphasize learner-driven problem-solving (Ellis, 2003), align with agentic principles by encouraging students to negotiate meaning and set personal objectives. Studies by Littlewood (2021) further suggest that incorporating self-assessment tools and peer feedback mechanisms into syllabi fosters metacognitive awareness, a critical component of agentic behavior.

Teacher Roles as Facilitators of Agency

Teachers play a pivotal role in cultivating agentic engagement by transitioning from traditional “knowledge transmitters” to facilitators of learner autonomy. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) argue that educators should adopt “dialogic teaching” strategies, such as open-ended questioning and collaborative goal-setting, to validate students’ voices. Professional development programs must equip teachers with skills to recognize and nurture agentic behaviors, such as proactive resource-seeking or initiative-taking in classroom discussions. For example, training modules could simulate scenarios where teachers practice balancing structured guidance with opportunities for student-led exploration.

Technology-Enhanced Environments for Agentic Practice

Digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities for learners to exercise agency beyond classroom confines. Lai and Zheng (2018) highlight how mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) platforms enable students to personalize learning trajectories through apps like Duolingo or language exchange forums. However, educators must critically evaluate technological interventions to avoid passive consumption. Stockwell (2013) advocates for “pedagogically informed” technology integration, such as designing flipped classrooms where students curate multimedia resources or engage in virtual reality simulations to practice language in contextually rich environments.

As AI-driven tools like ChatGPT become ubiquitous, researchers must address ethical dilemmas surrounding learner agency. While AI tutors can personalize feedback, overreliance on algorithms risks undermining learners’ critical thinking and self-regulation (Kukulka-Hulme, 2021). Future studies should explore frameworks for “human-centered AI” that augment rather than replace human agency, such as hybrid models where AI supports peer collaboration.

Sociocultural Sensitivity in Policy Design

Policymakers must recognize that agentic engagement is mediated by sociocultural factors. For instance, collectivist educational systems in East Asia may prioritize conformity over individual initiative, potentially stifling agentic behaviors (Teng & Zhang, 2020). Institutional reforms should promote culturally responsive pedagogies that reconcile local norms with agency-enhancing practices. This might involve revising assessment criteria to reward creative language use or funding community-based projects where learners apply FL skills to real-world issues (Ushioda, 2020).

Bridging the gap between research findings and policy implementation remains a persistent challenge. Collaborative action research involving teachers, policymakers, and learners could co-design evidence-based reforms. For instance, pilot programs testing agency-focused curricula in public schools—as proposed by Lamb and Arisandy (2020)—would provide actionable data for scaling successful initiatives.

Future Research Directions

Future research can lay more stress on cross-cultural validity, longitudinal investigations and intersectionality and inclusive pedagogies. While existing studies predominantly focus on Western contexts, the universality of agentic engagement frameworks remains contested. Future studies should adopt intersectional lenses to examine how gender, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity intersect with FL learning experiences. Canagarajah’s (2022) work on translanguaging in refugee education exemplifies how inclusive pedagogies can empower linguistically minoritized students to reclaim agency through hybrid language practices.

Agentic engagement redefines FL learning as a dynamic interplay between individual initiative and contextual support. By embedding agency-enhancing practices into curricula, teacher training, and technology integration, stakeholders can empower learners to navigate multilingual landscapes with confidence. Future research must prioritize culturally inclusive, longitudinal, and ethically grounded inquiries to advance both theory and practice.

Conclusion

This review underscores the transformative potential of agentic engagement in reshaping foreign language education. By positioning learners as proactive co-constructors of their learning journeys, agentic practices foster autonomy, motivation, and contextual adaptability, ultimately enhancing linguistic and metacognitive outcomes. Key implications for educators include prioritizing learner-centered curricula, adopting facilitative teaching roles, and integrating technology as a scaffold for—rather than a replacement of—human agency. Policymakers must also address sociocultural barriers to ensure equitable access to agency-enhancing opportunities. However, the field faces unresolved challenges, including the need for culturally inclusive frameworks, ethical guidelines for emerging technologies like AI, and longitudinal evidence on the sustainability of interventions. Future research should bridge these gaps by exploring how agency intersects with diverse learner identities, how it evolves across lifespans, and how globalized digital spaces can democratize language learning while preserving critical autonomy.

Ultimately, advancing agentic engagement demands collaborative efforts among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to create ecosystems where learners not only acquire languages but also cultivate the resilience and creativity needed to navigate an interconnected world.

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