

Perceived Teacher Support and Agentic Engagement in EFL Learning Among Chinese Non-English Major Freshmen: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Abstract— Grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), this study examined the relationship between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement among Chinese non-English major undergraduates in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. A total of 287 freshmen from a Chinese university completed validated scales measuring agentic engagement (Guo & Li, 2018) and perceived teacher support (Chi, 2017). Results indicated that participants' overall agentic engagement was at a moderate level ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.76$), with "self-directed effort" scoring highest ($M = 3.58$) and "helping teacher with instruction" lowest ($M = 2.52$). Perceived teacher support was moderately high ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.70$) and significantly predicted agentic engagement ($R = .534$, $R^2 = .286$, $\beta = .534$, $p < .001$). Among teacher support sub-dimensions, autonomy support emerged as the only significant unique predictor in multiple regression analysis ($\beta = .269$, $p = .005$). Gender differences were nonsignificant across all dimensions, while engineering majors reported significantly higher agentic engagement and teacher support than arts majors. These findings suggest that teacher support, particularly autonomy-supportive behaviors, plays a meaningful role in fostering learners' proactive contributions to the instructional process.

Keywords— agentic engagement, Chinese undergraduates, EFL learning, perceived teacher support, self-determination theory.



I. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has been widely recognized as a critical factor in learning outcomes across educational contexts (Hiver et al., 2021; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). In the field of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA), engagement is particularly consequential because classroom interaction often constitutes the primary and sometimes the only context in which learners receive meaningful language input and practice opportunities (Hiver et al., 2021). For the vast population of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in China, where naturalistic English exposure outside the classroom remains limited, the quality and nature of classroom

engagement directly shape language proficiency development.

Among the various conceptualizations of student engagement, agentic engagement represents a relatively novel and underexplored dimension. Introduced by Reeve and Tseng (2011), agentic engagement refers to students' constructive contributions to the flow of instruction they receive, that is, learners' proactive efforts to enrich, personalize, and improve the learning conditions they experience. Unlike behavioral engagement (e.g., attending class, completing assignments) or emotional engagement (e.g., enjoying the subject, feeling connected to the teacher), agentic engagement captures students' initiative in shaping the instructional process itself (Skinner, 2012),

such as offering suggestions to the teacher, sharing relevant resources with classmates, and communicating their learning needs.

Despite the theoretical promise of agentic engagement, empirical research on this construct in L2 learning contexts remains limited. Most existing studies on EFL learner engagement have focused on behavioral, emotional, or cognitive dimensions (Oga-Baldwin, 2019), while learners' proactive contributions to instruction have received comparatively little attention. Furthermore, the factors that promote or inhibit agentic engagement in EFL settings, particularly the role of perceived teacher support, have not been systematically investigated.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement among Chinese non-English major undergraduates. Grounded in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that social contexts supporting learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster greater motivational engagement, this study investigates how different dimensions of teacher support predict students' agentic engagement in EFL classrooms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Student Engagement in L2 Learning

Student engagement is broadly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities (Hiver et al., 2021). In L2 education, engagement has attracted growing scholarly attention as researchers recognize that language acquisition requires not only exposure to input but also active participation in meaning-making processes. Hiver et al. (2021) argued that engagement serves as a "bridge" between instructional opportunities and learning outcomes in the L2 classroom, mediating the effects of pedagogical interventions on language development. Similarly, Oga-Baldwin (2019) emphasized that engagement and motivation are inseparable in L2 learning, with engaged learners demonstrating greater persistence, deeper processing, and more positive attitudes toward the target language and culture.

2.2 Agentic Engagement

Reeve and Tseng (2011) proposed the concept of agentic engagement to capture a qualitatively distinct form of student involvement. According to Reeve and Tseng, agentially engaged learners do not merely respond to instructional demands; they actively contribute to the design and improvement of their learning environment.

This includes behaviors such as expressing preferences about course content, asking questions that enrich classroom discussion, communicating their interests to the teacher, and assisting peers in understanding course material. Reeve (2013) further elaborated on this concept, emphasizing that agentially engaged students constructively contribute to the instructional flow and create motivationally supportive learning environments for themselves.

In the Chinese EFL context, Guo and Li (2018) developed and validated the Foreign Language Learning Agentic Engagement Scale, operationalizing agentic engagement through four dimensions: (a) self-directed effort, defined as learners' proactive investment in their own language learning, such as actively confronting learning difficulties and cultivating a positive learning attitude; (b) helping teacher with instruction, defined as learners' contributions to the instructional process, such as providing the teacher with relevant materials and offering feedback on teaching; (c) cooperating with teacher, defined as learners' responsive participation in teacher-directed activities, such as attentive listening, completing assigned tasks, and preparing for class; and (d) helping classmates with learning, defined as learners' collaborative support for peers, such as encouraging classmates, sharing resources, and assisting with learning difficulties. This four-dimensional framework aligns with Reeve and Tseng's conceptualization while reflecting the characteristics of Chinese EFL classroom culture, where teacher authority is respected but peer collaboration is increasingly encouraged.

2.3 Perceived Teacher Support

Teacher support refers to students' perceptions of the extent to which their teachers create a learning environment that facilitates engagement and self-determination. Drawing on self-determination theory, Skinner and Belmont (1993) identified three key dimensions of teacher support: autonomy support (providing choices, acknowledging student perspectives, encouraging self-initiated learning), emotional support (demonstrating warmth, care, trustworthiness, and attentiveness to student feelings), and competence support (setting clear expectations, providing constructive feedback, acknowledging progress, and offering timely help). These dimensions correspond to the three basic psychological needs posited by SDT: autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and collectively create a motivational context conducive to engagement.

In the Chinese higher education context, Chi (2017) adapted and validated a perceived teacher support scale grounded in this theoretical framework, confirming

the three-dimensional structure among Chinese university students. The scale captures students' perceptions of how their instructors support their autonomy, attend to their emotional needs, and scaffold their sense of competence. These dimensions are particularly relevant in EFL classrooms where learner anxiety, motivation fluctuations, and perceived irrelevance of English are common challenges.

2.4 Self-Determination Theory as the Theoretical Framework

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provides the integrative framework for this study. SDT posits that all individuals possess three innate psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel volitional and self-endorsing in one's actions), competence (the need to feel effective in interacting with the environment), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to and valued by significant others). When these needs are satisfied by the social environment, individuals experience greater intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and more positive developmental outcomes.

In the EFL classroom, teacher support serves as a critical environmental factor that can satisfy or thwart these basic needs. From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), the teacher functions as a more knowledgeable other who scaffolds learners' development through social interaction, a process that is most productive when the social context is responsive to the learner's needs and agency. Autonomy-supportive teachers who offer choices and respect student perspectives nurture the need for autonomy. Emotionally supportive teachers who demonstrate care and trustworthiness fulfill the need for relatedness. Competence-supportive teachers who set clear expectations and provide constructive feedback strengthen the sense of efficacy. When these needs are met, learners are theorized to transition from passive compliance to active, agentic participation, the hallmark of agentic engagement (Reeve, 2013).

2.5 The Present Study

Although prior research has established links between teacher support and general student engagement, the specific relationship between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement in EFL contexts has received limited empirical attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating Chinese non-English major freshmen, a population that constitutes the majority of English learners in Chinese higher education and that often exhibits passive, compliance-oriented engagement patterns in EFL classrooms. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the current level of agentic engagement among Chinese non-English major freshmen

in EFL learning, and how do the four dimensions compare?

RQ2: What is the level of perceived teacher support reported by these students?

RQ3: To what extent does perceived teacher support predict agentic engagement overall and its four sub-dimensions?

RQ4: Do agentic engagement and perceived teacher support differ by gender or academic major?

III. METHOD

3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited from a comprehensive university in central China through convenience sampling. A total of 311 non-English major freshmen completed the online questionnaire via the Wenjuanxing platform (<https://www.wjx.cn>). A lie detection item was embedded in the questionnaire to screen for careless responding; 24 respondents who failed this item were excluded, yielding a final valid sample of 287 participants (valid response rate = 92.3%).

The sample comprised 105 males (36.6%) and 182 females (63.4%). All participants were first-year undergraduate students. Regarding academic major, 157 students (54.7%) were from engineering, 100 (34.8%) from arts, 11 (3.8%) from economics, 10 (3.5%) from sciences, 4 (1.4%) from medicine, 4 (1.4%) from management, and 1 (0.3%) from literature. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided voluntary consent.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Agentic Engagement Scale

The Foreign Language Learning Agentic Engagement Scale (Guo & Li, 2018) was used to measure participants' agentic engagement in EFL learning. The scale comprises 14 items across four dimensions: self-directed effort (4 items, e.g., "I actively confront and resolve difficulties in English learning"), helping teacher with instruction (3 items, e.g., "I provide my English teacher with relevant materials and information"), cooperating with teacher (4 items, e.g., "I listen attentively in English class"), and helping classmates with learning (3 items, e.g., "I encourage my classmates to learn English well"). One item in the self-directed effort dimension ("I do not study English hard") is reverse-scored. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater agentic engagement.

3.2.2 Perceived Teacher Support Scale

The Perceived Teacher Support Scale, adapted by Chi (2017) from Skinner and Belmont (1993), was used to measure students’ perceptions of teacher support in EFL learning. The scale consists of 13 items across three dimensions: autonomy support (5 items, e.g., “In English learning, the teacher provides us with choices and opportunities”), emotional support (4 items, e.g., “The English teacher cares about students”), and competence support (4 items, e.g., “The English teacher sets clear learning expectations for us”). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online through the Wenjuanxing survey platform. Participants were recruited via class announcements and voluntarily completed the survey during their spare time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The questionnaire included a demographic section followed by the two scales, with the agentic engagement scale presented before the teacher support scale. A lie detection item was inserted between items 13 and 15 of the agentic engagement scale to identify inattentive respondents.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0 and Python 3.0 with the scipy and pyreadstat libraries. Descriptive statistics were computed for all scales and sub-dimensions. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated to assess internal consistency reliability. Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to examine bivariate relationships among variables. Simple linear regression was used to test the predictive effect of perceived teacher support on agentic engagement, and multiple regression was conducted to examine the unique contributions of each teacher support sub-dimension. Independent-samples t tests were used to examine gender and major differences.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were computed for both scales and their sub-dimensions (see Table 1). The overall agentic engagement scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .930$), with sub-dimension alphas ranging from .840 to .909. The overall perceived teacher support scale also showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .969$), with sub-dimension alphas ranging from .921 to .944. All coefficients exceeded the .80 threshold, indicating that both scales were highly reliable for this sample.

Table 1 Reliability Coefficients for the Agentic Engagement and Perceived Teacher Support Scales

Scale / Dimension	Items	α
Agentic Engagement (total)	14	.930
Self-directed effort	4	.872
Helping teacher with instruction	3	.909
Cooperating with teacher	4	.897
Helping classmates with learning	3	.840
Perceived Teacher Support (total)	13	.969
Autonomy support	5	.925
Emotional support	4	.921

4.2 Validity Evidence

Evidence for the construct validity of both scales has been established in prior validation studies and further supported by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted on the present data. For the agentic engagement scale, the CFA yielded acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.742$, IFI = .960, TLI = .948, CFI = .960, RMSEA = .075, SRMR = .057. The composite reliability (CR) values ranged from .845 to .912, and average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from .635 to .776, all exceeding the recommended thresholds (CR $\geq .70$, AVE $\geq .50$). For the perceived teacher support scale, the CFA results were χ^2/df

= 5.213, IFI = .940, TLI = .925, CFI = .940, RMSEA = .117, SRMR = .036. The CR values ranged from .917 to .936 and AVE values from .709 to .785, indicating adequate convergent validity. The elevated χ^2/df and RMSEA for the teacher support scale may be attributable to the relatively large sample size, which tends to inflate chi-square statistics (Kline, 2016). Discriminant validity was supported for both scales, as the square root of AVE for each dimension exceeded the inter-factor correlations.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics for Agentic Engagement (RQ1)

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for agentic engagement at both the dimension and item levels.

The overall agentic engagement mean was 3.21 (SD = 0.76) on the 5-point scale, indicating a moderate level of agentic engagement among the participants.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Agentic Engagement (N = 287)

Dimension / Item	Min	Max	M	SD
Self-directed effort			3.58	0.87
Q1: Actively confront difficulties	1	5	3.45	1.05
Q2: Use various methods to improve English	1	5	3.79	0.96
Q3: Cultivate positive learning attitude	1	5	3.48	1.00
Q4: Do not study English hard (R)	1	5	3.59	1.10
Helping teacher with instruction			2.52	0.96
Q5: Provide teacher with materials	1	5	2.37	0.99
Q6: Offer teaching suggestions	1	5	2.49	1.04
Q7: Communicate learning interests to teacher	1	5	2.71	1.10
Cooperating with teacher			3.49	0.88
Q8: Listen attentively in class	1	5	3.68	0.98
Q9: Complete learning tasks actively	1	5	3.70	0.97
Q10: Participate in classroom activities	1	5	3.59	1.01
Q11: Preview lesson content	1	5	3.00	1.07
Helping classmates with learning			3.26	0.95
Q12: Encourage classmates to learn English	1	5	3.33	1.12
Q13: Share learning materials with classmates	1	5	3.30	1.09
Q15: Help classmates with difficulties	1	5	3.15	1.08
Agentic Engagement (total)			3.21	0.76

Note. (R) = reverse-scored item.

Among the four dimensions, self-directed effort scored highest (M = 3.58, SD = 0.87), followed by cooperating with teacher (M = 3.49, SD = 0.88), helping classmates with learning (M = 3.26, SD = 0.95), and helping teacher with instruction (M = 2.52, SD = 0.96). The “helping teacher with instruction” dimension was markedly lower than the other three dimensions, suggesting that students rarely initiated proactive contributions to the instructional process.

At the item level, Q2 (“I use various methods to improve my English”; M = 3.79) and Q9 (“I actively complete learning tasks assigned by the teacher”; M = 3.70) scored highest, reflecting relatively strong resource-

utilization and task compliance behaviors. Conversely, Q5 (“I provide my English teacher with relevant materials”; M = 2.37) and Q6 (“I offer suggestions to improve teaching”; M = 2.49) scored lowest, indicating that students rarely engaged in proactive instructional-contribution behaviors.

4.4 Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Teacher Support (RQ2)

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for perceived teacher support. The overall mean was 4.02 (SD = 0.70), indicating that participants generally perceived a moderately high level of teacher support in their EFL classrooms.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Teacher Support (N = 287)

Dimension / Item	M	SD
Autonomy support	4.01	0.70
Q16: Teacher provides choices and opportunities	3.92	0.87
Q17: Teacher tries to understand students’ perspectives	3.97	0.82
Q18: Teacher listens patiently to students	4.07	0.80

Q19: Teacher tells students how to complete tasks	4.05	0.78
Q20: Teacher considers students' teaching suggestions	4.06	0.79
Emotional support	4.03	0.72
Q21: Teacher cares about students	4.17	0.78
Q22: Teacher knows students well	3.83	0.88
Q23: Teacher is trustworthy	4.10	0.80
Q24: Teacher encourages when performance is poor	4.02	0.87
Competence support	4.03	0.72
Q25: Teacher sets clear learning expectations	4.11	0.81
Q26: Teacher provides timely help	4.04	0.85
Q27: Teacher acknowledges progress	4.00	0.83
Q28: Teacher provides constructive feedback	3.98	0.79
Perceived Teacher Support (total)	4.02	0.70

The three sub-dimensions scored nearly identically: autonomy support ($M = 4.01$), emotional support ($M = 4.03$), and competence support ($M = 4.03$). Among individual items, Q21 ("The teacher cares about students"; $M = 4.17$) and Q25 ("The teacher sets clear learning expectations"; $M = 4.11$) received the highest ratings, while Q22 ("The teacher knows students well"; M

$= 3.83$) and Q16 ("The teacher provides choices and opportunities"; $M = 3.92$) scored relatively lower.

4.5 Correlations Between Perceived Teacher Support and Agentic Engagement

Pearson correlations were computed to examine the bivariate relationships between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement (see **Table 4**).

Table 4 Pearson Correlations Between Agentic Engagement and Perceived Teacher Support ($N = 287$)

Variable	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. AE total	—								
2. Self-directed effort	.829***	—							
3. Helping teacher	.721***	.520***	—						
4. Cooperating	.855***	.593***	.577***	—					
5. Helping classmates	.836***	.575***	.590***	.605***	—				
6. TS total	.534***	.401***	.377***	.596***	.400***	—			
7. Autonomy support	.514***	.386***	.360***	.579***	.383***	.902***	—		
8. Emotional support	.505***	.382***	.350***	.564***	.381***	.889***	.703***	—	
9. Competence support	.506***	.377***	.365***	.558***	.379***	.905***	.731***	.769***	—

Note. AE = agentic engagement; TS = teacher support. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 4, the overall correlation between agentic engagement and perceived teacher support was positive and moderate ($r = .534$, $p < .001$). Among the agentic engagement sub-dimensions, cooperating with teacher exhibited the strongest correlation with teacher support ($r = .596$), while helping teacher with instruction showed the weakest ($r = .377$). All three teacher support sub-dimensions correlated

significantly and similarly with agentic engagement ($r_s = .505-.514$).

4.6 Regression Analyses (RQ3)

4.6.1 Simple Linear Regression: Teacher Support $\rightarrow$ Agentic Engagement

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine the predictive effect of perceived teacher support on agentic engagement (see **Table 5**). The results indicated that

perceived teacher support significantly predicted agentic engagement, $R = .534$, $R^2 = .286$, $F(1, 285) = 113.971$, $p < .001$, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta =$

.534. That is, perceived teacher support accounted for 28.6% of the variance in agentic engagement.

Table 5 Regression of Agentic Engagement on Perceived Teacher Support

Predictor	B	SE	β	R^2	F
TS total → AE total	0.580	0.054	.534***	.286	113.971***
TS total → Self-directed effort	0.498	0.067	.401***	.161	54.716***
TS total → Helping teacher	0.514	0.075	.377***	.142	47.199***
TS total → Cooperating	0.747	0.060	.596***	.355	157.099***
TS total → Helping classmates	0.541	0.073	.400***	.160	54.417***

Note. TS = teacher support; AE = agentic engagement. $df = (1, 285)$ for all models. *** $p < .001$.

Separate regressions for each agentic engagement sub-dimension revealed that teacher support predicted cooperating with teacher most strongly ($R^2 = .355$, $\beta = .596$), followed by self-directed effort ($R^2 = .161$, $\beta = .401$), helping classmates ($R^2 = .160$, $\beta = .400$), and helping teacher with instruction ($R^2 = .142$, $\beta = .377$).

4.6.2 Multiple Regression: Teacher Support Sub-dimensions → Agentic Engagement

A multiple regression was conducted to examine the unique contribution of each teacher support sub-dimension to agentic engagement (see **Table 6**).

Table 6 Multiple Regression of Agentic Engagement on Teacher Support Sub-dimensions

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Autonomy support	0.286	0.102	.269	2.808	.005
Emotional support	0.115	0.131	.114	0.879	.380
Competence support	0.182	0.122	.182	1.487	.138

Note. $R^2 = .288$, Adjusted $R^2 = .280$, $F(3, 283) = 38.155$, $p < .001$.

The overall model was significant, accounting for 28.8% of the variance in agentic engagement (adjusted $R^2 = .280$). However, only autonomy support emerged as a significant unique predictor ($\beta = .269$, $p = .005$), while emotional support ($\beta = .114$, $p = .380$) and competence support ($\beta = .182$, $p = .138$) did not reach significance when entered simultaneously. This suggests that the three sub-dimensions share substantial variance (inter-correlations $r_s = .70-.77$), and it is primarily the autonomy-supportive aspect of teacher behavior that uniquely contributes to students' agentic engagement.

4.6.3 Individual Teacher Support Sub-dimensions → Agentic Engagement

To further explore the predictive patterns, separate simple regressions were conducted for each teacher support sub-

dimension predicting overall agentic engagement. Autonomy support ($R^2 = .264$, $\beta = .514$, $F[1, 285] = 102.476$), emotional support ($R^2 = .255$, $\beta = .505$, $F[1, 285] = 97.514$), and competence support ($R^2 = .256$, $\beta = .506$, $F[1, 285] = 98.094$) each individually predicted agentic engagement with comparable effect sizes, confirming that the three sub-dimensions contribute similarly to agentic engagement when considered in isolation.

4.7 Group Differences (RQ4)

4.7.1 Gender Differences

Independent-samples t tests were conducted to examine gender differences in agentic engagement and perceived teacher support (see **Table 7**).

Table 7 Gender Differences in Agentic Engagement and Perceived Teacher Support

Variable	Male M	Male SD	Female M	Female SD	t	p
AE total	3.21	0.85	3.22	0.70	-0.099	.921
Self-directed effort	3.56	0.97	3.58	0.82	-0.182	.856
Helping teacher	2.57	1.11	2.50	0.87	0.579	.563

Cooperating	3.50	0.89	3.49	0.88	0.114	.909
Helping classmates	3.20	1.13	3.29	0.84	−0.840	.402
TS total	4.10	0.72	3.98	0.69	1.391	.165

Note. Male $n = 105$; Female $n = 182$.

No significant gender differences were found for any agentic engagement dimension or perceived teacher support (all $ps > .16$), suggesting that male and female students reported comparable levels of both agentic engagement and teacher support.

4.7.2 Major Differences

Given that engineering (54.7%) and arts (34.8%) students constituted the vast majority of the sample, an exploratory comparison was conducted between these two groups. Engineering students reported significantly higher agentic engagement ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.77$) than arts students ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.71$), $t(255) = 2.664$, $p = .008$. Similarly, engineering students perceived significantly more teacher support ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.71$) than arts students ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(255) = 4.259$, $p < .001$. These differences suggest that the academic discipline context may shape both students' engagement patterns and their perceptions of instructional support.

V. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationship between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement among Chinese non-English major freshmen in EFL classrooms, drawing on self-determination theory as the guiding framework. The findings reveal several noteworthy patterns that contribute to the understanding of how teacher support relates to students' proactive engagement in language learning.

5.1 Moderate Agentic Engagement with a Distinct Profile

The overall agentic engagement mean of 3.21 on a 5-point scale indicates that participants were moderately engaged in agentic behaviors, but with substantial room for improvement. The dimensional profile revealed a clear hierarchy: self-directed effort scored highest, followed by cooperating with teacher, helping classmates, and helping teacher with instruction, which was markedly lowest. This pattern suggests that students were more comfortable with self-regulated and compliant forms of engagement than with behaviors requiring proactive initiative toward the teacher or the instructional process.

The particularly low score on the "helping teacher with instruction" dimension ($M = 2.52$) is a notable finding. Items such as "providing the teacher with

materials" ($M = 2.37$) and "offering teaching suggestions" ($M = 2.49$) were endorsed at below-midpoint levels, indicating that the majority of students rarely engaged in these behaviors. This likely reflects the traditional teacher-centered orientation of Chinese EFL classrooms, where students perceive the teacher as the authoritative knowledge provider and are reluctant to offer unsolicited instructional contributions (Guo & Li, 2018). The cultural norm of respecting teacher authority, while fostering cooperative behaviors, may inadvertently suppress the proactive, teacher-directed aspects of agentic engagement.

5.2 Moderately High Teacher Support Perceptions

Participants perceived a moderately high level of teacher support ($M = 4.02$), with the three sub-dimensions scoring nearly identically (4.01–4.03). This suggests that students generally felt their English teachers were supportive across autonomy, emotional, and competence dimensions. However, the relatively lower ratings on "teacher knows students well" ($M = 3.83$) and "teacher provides choices and opportunities" ($M = 3.92$) point to specific areas where teacher support could be strengthened. In large Chinese university EFL classes, which often enroll 40–60 students, developing individualized relationships and providing differentiated autonomy opportunities present practical challenges.

5.3 Teacher Support as a Significant Predictor of Agentic Engagement

The central finding of this study is that perceived teacher support significantly predicted agentic engagement, accounting for 28.6% of its variance ($\beta = .534$). This finding aligns with the theoretical predictions of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which holds that supportive social environments facilitate the internalization of motivation and the emergence of proactive engagement behaviors. It also extends Reeve's (2013) argument that teacher-created conditions are pivotal for agentic engagement by providing empirical evidence from the EFL context.

Among the four agentic engagement dimensions, cooperating with teacher was most strongly predicted by teacher support ($R^2 = .355$, $\beta = .596$). This is conceptually coherent: when students perceive their teacher as supportive—offering choices, demonstrating care, and providing clear expectations—they are more likely to

respond with attentive, compliant, and cooperative classroom behaviors. The strong predictive link between teacher support and cooperation resonates with the well-documented finding that teacher warmth and structure elicit responsive student engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

The weakest (though still significant) prediction was for helping teacher with instruction ($R^2 = .142$, $\beta = .377$). This dimension's low mean and modest predictability suggest that even when students perceive strong teacher support, their proactive instructional contributions remain limited. This may indicate that additional factors beyond teacher support—such as students' self-efficacy beliefs about their instructional competence (Bandura, 1997), their perception of the teacher's receptiveness to student input, or institutional norms regarding student-teacher roles—play a role in shaping this particular form of agentic engagement.

5.4 Autonomy Support as the Key Unique Predictor

The multiple regression analysis revealed that among the three teacher support sub-dimensions, only autonomy support emerged as a significant unique predictor of agentic engagement ($\beta = .269$, $p = .005$). Emotional support and competence support, while individually correlated with agentic engagement at comparable levels ($r_s = .505-.514$), did not contribute unique variance when entered alongside autonomy support. This is likely because the three sub-dimensions are highly intercorrelated ($r_s = .70-.77$), and autonomy support captured the shared variance most effectively.

Theoretically, this finding underscores the particular relevance of autonomy support for agentic engagement. By definition, agentic engagement involves students taking initiative and making constructive contributions to the instructional process—behaviors that are fundamentally autonomous in nature (Reeve, 2013). When teachers provide choices, respect student perspectives, and encourage self-initiated learning, they create the psychological conditions that make agentic action feel safe, valued, and self-congruent. This finding has direct implications for EFL pedagogy: instructors who wish to foster students' proactive engagement should prioritize autonomy-supportive practices such as soliciting student input on course content, offering flexible assignment options, and encouraging learners to set personal learning goals.

5.5 No Gender Differences, but Major Differences

The absence of gender differences in agentic engagement and perceived teacher support is consistent with some prior research suggesting that engagement patterns in L2 learning are shaped more by instructional context and

motivational factors than by gender per se. The finding that engineering students reported higher agentic engagement and teacher support than arts students is intriguing and warrants further investigation. One possible explanation is that engineering students, whose curricula typically emphasize structured problem-solving, may perceive the relatively systematic nature of EFL instruction as more supportive, or that EFL courses within engineering departments are taught differently from those in arts departments.

5.6 Pedagogical Implications

Based on the findings, several pedagogical recommendations can be offered for EFL instructors teaching non-English major students in Chinese universities. First, teachers should actively create opportunities for students to exercise agency in the classroom, such as inviting students to suggest topics for discussion, co-design assessment criteria, or lead warm-up activities. These practices directly address the “helping teacher with instruction” dimension, which was identified as the weakest aspect of agentic engagement. Second, autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors should be prioritized, as this dimension was the only unique predictor of agentic engagement. Concrete strategies include providing meaningful choices in assignment topics, encouraging students to set their own learning goals, and acknowledging students' perspectives when making instructional decisions. Third, teachers should attend to building individualized relationships with students—the relatively low rating on “teacher knows students well” suggests room for improvement in this area.

5.7 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was drawn from a single university and consisted entirely of first-year students, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other institutions, grade levels, and educational contexts. Future research should employ multi-site sampling and include students from different academic years. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; although the regression analyses demonstrated predictive associations, the direction of the relationship between teacher support and agentic engagement may be bidirectional. Longitudinal or experimental designs would strengthen causal claims. Third, all data were collected via self-report, which is subject to social desirability bias and common method variance. Future studies could incorporate observational measures of agentic engagement or collect teacher-report data to triangulate findings. Fourth, this study examined only teacher support as a predictor; other potentially important factors such as peer support, self-efficacy,

classroom environment, and individual differences in motivation were not included. A more comprehensive model integrating multiple predictors and potential mediators would advance understanding of the mechanisms underlying agentic engagement in EFL learning. Finally, the relatively large inter-correlations among the teacher support sub-dimensions suggest potential multicollinearity concerns in the multiple regression; future research with larger samples might employ structural equation modeling to more precisely estimate the unique and shared contributions of each support dimension.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between perceived teacher support and agentic engagement among 287 Chinese non-English major freshmen in EFL classrooms. The findings revealed that students' agentic engagement was at a moderate level, with proactive contributions to instruction being particularly limited. Perceived teacher support was moderately high and significantly predicted agentic engagement, accounting for 28.6% of its variance. Among the three teacher support dimensions, autonomy support was the only significant unique predictor. No gender differences were observed, but engineering students reported higher agentic engagement and teacher support than arts students. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on student engagement in L2 learning and offer practical guidance for EFL educators seeking to foster more proactive and agentic forms of student participation. Grounded in self-determination theory, the study underscores the importance of autonomy-supportive teaching practices in nurturing learners' initiative, constructive contributions, and active engagement in the foreign language classroom.

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