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Autonomy-Supportive Foreign Language Teaching: Connotation, Practice and Prospects

Xiaoquan Pan[1]*, Huijuan Shao[2]

1. Xingzhi College, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China
pxq@zjnu.cn
2. Xingzhi College, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China
hjshao@zjnu.cn
* Corresponding author: Xiaoquan Pan, Xingzhi College, Zhejiang Normal University, 688 Yingbin Road, Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, China. E-mail: pxq@zjnu.cn

Abstract: *Autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching, oriented towards stimulating intrinsic motivation and cultivating core competencies, transforms students' language learning experience from passive memorization to active meaning construction through the restructuring of the teaching environment and teacher-student relationships. This study systematically elaborates its theoretical core grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), emphasizing the fundamental role of fulfilling basic psychological needs for sustaining learning. It provides an in-depth analysis of four key practical pathways, including creating supportive contexts and empowering the learning process, and illustrates specific operational scenarios with examples. Finally, by considering emerging technological trends like artificial intelligence and the ongoing digital transformation of education, it offers forward-looking reflections on future directions. This study identifies critical issues such as technology empowering personalized learning, the deep transformation of teacher roles, and balancing technological efficiency with humanistic care. It posits that constructing a "human-machine collaborative" dynamic equilibrium ecosystem is the core pathway towards achieving high-quality development in foreign language education.*

Keywords—autonomy-supportive teaching; foreign language teaching; digital education; learning motivation; educational technology

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching has evolved through paradigm shifts from structuralism and cognitivism to sociocultural theory, gradually freeing itself from the constraints of unilateral teacher-led "knowledge indoctrination". In the era of globalization, the demand for foreign language professionals has shifted from singular "linguistic competence" toward "core competencies". China's Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) explicitly states that English teaching should "guide students to develop language abilities, cultivate cultural awareness, enhance thinking capacities, and improve learning skills", emphasizing the activation of student agency and the symbiotic development of multidimensional competencies. However, in practice, traditional models prioritizing "knowledge input over competence development" persist tenaciously. For instance: excessive focus on grammatical structure drills leads to cognitive rigidity in learners; standardized assessment systems constrict space for autonomous exploration; and ineffective deep learning occurs due to insufficient intrinsic motivation and ambiguous learning goals.

It is against this backdrop that autonomy-supportive teaching (AST) has naturally emerged. It serves not merely as a corrective critique of traditional foreign language pedagogy but, more fundamentally, reconstructs a learner-centered framework anchored in intrinsic needs and psychological fulfillment from perspectives of deep learning psychology and educational ecology (Reeve & Jang, 2006). This novel pedagogical paradigm provides fresh theoretical and practical perspectives for foreign language instruction by activating learners' intrinsic curiosity, enhancing behavioral self-regulation, and strengthening collaborative engagement efficacy. It shifts the pedagogical focus from teacher-directed instruction to student cognitive participation, and from outcome-oriented evaluation to monitoring of competency growth. This study will systematically deconstruct the core essence of the autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching model, summarize its innovative practical strategies, and conduct forward-looking research within the context of advancements such as artificial intelligence and educational big data. The aim is to furnish theoretical and practical foundations for constructing a foreign language teaching system aligned with contemporary demands.

2. DECONSTRUCTING THE ESSENCE OF AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

2.1 Conceptual Definition

Autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching is not merely about reducing teacher control or inflating learner freedom; rather, it constitutes a systemic shift in pedagogical philosophy and methodology (Stefanou et al., 2004). Its core lies in teachers effectively addressing students' three fundamental psychological needs by structuring psychologically safe environments conducive to open

exploration, employing specific verbal and non-verbal interaction strategies, thereby activating deep agency and fostering meaningful learning processes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is crucial to distinguish autonomy support from self-access learning; the former emphasizes that teacher support is a necessary precondition for students to develop autonomy capacity (Little, 2007).

Autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching is a pedagogical paradigm centered around Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It refers to a systematic practice wherein teachers facilitate the internalization of learning motivation and the development of foreign language learning autonomy by creating instructional environments that satisfy learners' basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Its essence involves a shift from a "teacher-centered" to a "learner-centered" approach. It emphasizes teachers assisting learners in becoming strategic decision-makers through methods such as offering choice in learning pathways, designing open-ended tasks, and providing growth-oriented feedback (Reeve, 2006). Within the language teaching context, this model focuses on resolving the dual tensions of "language learning anxiety" and "instrumental motivation dominance". Through structural reconfiguration of the teaching relationship (e.g., negotiating learning objectives, co-constructing assessment criteria), it transforms foreign language learning from passive reception into an agentive process of meaning construction (Ushioda, 2011).

Operational dimensions of this concept encompass three interacting layers: The Curriculum Design Layer focuses on multimodal provision of learning resources and differentiated task sequencing (Benson, 2011). The Teacher-Student Interaction Layer requires teachers to minimize controlling directives and utilize supportive discourse instead (Reeve & Jang, 2006). The Environment Structuring Layer pertains to establishing mechanisms for collaborative inquiry within both physical and virtual spaces. Distinct from traditional "empowerment-based learner autonomy", its uniqueness lies in employing "supportive intervention" as scaffolding. That is, teachers guide learners toward gradual self-regulation through sustained instructional supports like explicit cognitive strategy modeling and metacognitive dialogue (Little, 2007). This model of "guided autonomy" demonstrates that genuine learner empowerment does not equate to laissez-faire abandonment. Rather, it necessitates designed scaffolding to help learners bridge their zone of proximal development (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as the core theoretical framework for analyzing autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching, was initially proposed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s and has been continuously refined (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Rooted in the humanistic assumption that "humans possess a natural propensity for growth," SDT posits that sparking intrinsic motivation hinges upon fulfilling three basic psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. Applied to foreign language teaching, autonomy refers to learners' sense of proactive control over learning goals, content, and methods; competence manifests as learners' confidence in mastering language skills; and relatedness concerns supportive interactions among teachers and learners (Reeve, 2016).

SDT asserts that when an instructional environment satisfies these needs, learners transition from passive recipients to active self-regulators. Their motivation progressively internalizes from external regulation to integrated regulation, ultimately fostering sustainable learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This mechanism provides the meta-theoretical underpinning for understanding autonomy-supportive teaching: its goal is not unstructured learning abandonment, but rather the construction of an adaptive learning ecosystem through need-supportive strategies.

On the practical dimension, SDT's guiding principles for foreign language teaching manifest in four key operational pathways: dismantling controlling behaviors, strengthening valuing of the learning content, providing meaningful choice, and acknowledging negative emotions (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Empirical research confirms that in classrooms adopting an SDT framework, teachers' use of strategies such as non-controlling language, acknowledging learning difficulties, and designing stepped challenges significantly enhances learners' classroom engagement and the quality of language output (Wang et al., 2020). Crucially, these supportive behaviors demonstrate cross-cultural adaptability. Research on Chinese EFL learners indicates that when teachers simultaneously maintain classroom structure and infuse autonomy support, they effectively reconcile the tension between traditional compliance in collectivist cultures and individual autonomous development. This anchors a theoretical foundation for the localized implementation of autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching within global contexts.

3. Analyzing the Practical Pathways of Autonomy-Supportive Foreign Language Teaching

3.1 Fostering a Psychologically Safe and Belonging-Enriched Learning Environment

Within the framework of autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching, creating a learning environment characterized by psychological safety and belonging stands as the primary and core practical pathway (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Psychological safety refers to the psychological environment in which learners feel confident they can freely ask questions, take risks, make mistakes, and express genuine ideas without fearing negative judgment or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). The highly interactive nature of foreign language acquisition, coupled with frequent self-exposure, renders learners particularly susceptible to anxiety, identity confusion, and mistake phobia. Research by David et al. (2024) indicates that when learners perceive threat, heightened amygdala activation in response to errors significantly impedes their language

representation reconstruction and memory encoding processes, thereby impairing learning efficiency. Consequently, teachers must consistently convey positive informational feedback instead of controlling evaluations to affirm the value of attempts (Röhl et al., 2025). Co-constructing shared learning norms coupled with the teacher's open acceptance of uncertainty, which can significantly reduce learners' psychological defense mechanisms and effectively cultivate a psychologically safe atmosphere conducive to deep cognitive processing.

However, safety does not exist in isolation; it requires consolidation and deepening within authentic group connections and identity affirmation. When cultivating a sense of belonging within a learning community, teachers should treat learners' identities and cultural capital as core pedagogical resources (García & Wei, 2014). Specific practical strategies include:

(1) Creating Spaces for Cultural Immersion and Affirmation: Guiding students through project-based learning centered on multicultural narratives, or sharing commonalities and differences between native and target language cultures to foster intercultural self-identification. Lu and Zuo (2025) found that incorporating reciprocal translation of traditional proverbs and stories in EFL classrooms significantly enhanced students' perceived mattering.

(2) Establishing Structured Peer Support Systems: Implementing strategies such as assigning fixed "peer anchors" to provide emotional and cognitive support during challenging tasks, designing collaborative roles with complementary functions, and reinforcing positive interaction norms through "appreciation rounds" (Zhang et al., 2023). Extensive meta-analyses confirm that such structured collaborations significantly enhance belongingness.

(3) Leveraging Technology-Enabled Low-Stakes Practice Arenas: Utilizing VR platforms to simulate authentic yet low-anxiety communicative scenarios, or employing AI chatbots for anonymous rehearsals (Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025).

Crucially, in multicultural classrooms, teachers must be vigilant in identifying structural implicit exclusion and utilize meta-communication strategies to expose and collaboratively address it (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). The deepening of belonging is an ongoing process, requiring teachers' highly conscious practice of culturally and emotionally responsive pedagogy. Its essence lies in enabling every learner to feel seen, respected, and needed on both cognitive and emotional levels.

3.2 Designing a Task System with Intrinsic Incentives

Intrinsic motivation springs from an individual's inherent interest in the task activity itself and their sense of autonomous participation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Its core lies in the task's ability to continuously satisfy learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The design of the task system should focus on three critical dimensions (Reeve, 2006): (1) Authenticity and Relevance. Task scenarios should closely mirror learners' real lives or future academic/professional contexts (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). For instance, simulating a global team negotiation scenario in Business English instruction allows students to experience the practical value of language as a tool, triggering intrinsic motivation to learn. (2) Optimal Challenge Sequencing. Designing an appropriate challenge gradient is crucial. Task difficulty should be dynamically calibrated to the student's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Providing progressive cognitive scaffolding (e.g., vocabulary guides, sentence templates) reduces initial anxiety, while gradually introducing semi-open questions guides learners through a positive cycle of "exploration—insight—fulfillment", thereby strengthening their sense of efficacy. (3) Cognitive-Affective Synergy. Embedding affectively engaging elements, such as comparative multicultural perspectives, personal narrative sharing, or creative expression (e.g., dramatizing literary works), transforms the language learning process into a journey of identity exploration and cultural resonance (Dörnyei, 2009), fostering deep-seated learning drive.

Task implementation necessitates building dynamic interactivity and sustainable motivational mechanisms. Project-Based Learning (PBL) serves as an ideal vehicle. PBL, characterized by goal orientation, collaborative autonomy, and tangible outcomes, has been shown by research to not only enhance comprehensive language proficiency but also induce sustained flow experiences by solving authentic problems (Novalia et al., 2006). Integrating gamification mechanisms boosts process motivation. Examples include point systems where achieving breakthroughs in linguistic complexity earns "Explorer Medals", or receiving "Collaborator Stars" for helping peers improve through mutual feedback. Such mechanisms translate long-term learning goals into phased achievements via immediate feedback, moderate competition, and visualized growth paths. Social Collaboration is indispensable. Structuring interdependent tasks (Slavin, 1995), such as having speakers of different native languages serve as reciprocal "language-cultural consultants" in a transnational online book club to co-produce in-depth discussion reports on a target language book, naturally fulfills individual needs for belonging during interaction. This renders foreign language learning a meaning-co-constructing social practice.

Within tasks, teachers should act as cognitive and affective facilitators (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023). While ensuring core objectives are met, allowing self-selection of task approaches elevates instrumental language use to a self-actualizing experience.

It is evident that designing an intrinsically motivating task system is, in essence, a complex systems engineering effort. It requires the synergistic integration of cognitive engagement, affective arousal, and social interaction to truly activate learners' intrinsic motivational core.

3.3 Granting Process Choice and Learning Decision-making Space

Empowering learners hinges on freeing them from external constraints and genuinely returning the agency of choice and decision-making space over their learning process to the students. This is by no means abandoning structure, but rather a carefully constructed framework built upon the principle of dynamically matching flexible structures designed by the educator with the learner's capability level (Reinders & Benson, 2020).

Within autonomy-supportive teaching practice, this empowerment manifests as a progressive three-dimensional structure: (1) Goal-Setting Choice. Learners, guided by the teacher, can negotiate and adjust macro learning directions and even specific task objectives based on personal interests, language proficiency levels, and practical needs. As Pintrich's (2000) model of self-regulated learning (SRL) advocates, clear and self-endorsed goals are central to sparking deep motivation. (2) Method-Path Choice. Students are encouraged to explore learning strategies and resource channels aligned with their cognitive styles, such as preferring solitary textbook study versus collaboratively designing language tasks around film/TV scenes, choosing to organize vocabulary networks with mind maps, or sticking with traditional memorization. (3) Evaluation Method Choice. Learners participate in co-constructing evaluation criteria and have opportunities to use diverse assessment tools like portfolios for self-assessment and peer-assessment. This process is supported through structured reflective tools powerfully scaffolded by the teacher. The integration of these three dimensions essentially represents a practical enactment of the "learning as self-construction" concept (Little, 2007). It demands that teachers transform from prescribers into option designers and process negotiators. While safeguarding essential learning objectives, they provide differentiated pathways and personalized support, guiding students towards internalizing agency and responsibility for their learning through the practice of making responsible choices and decisions.

The technologically enabled digital learning ecosystem provides revolutionary support for constructing expansive, flexible, and recordable analytic decision-making spaces. Modern Learning Management Systems (LMS), adaptive learning platforms, interactive language learning software, and various asynchronous communication tools together weave a highly personalized network (Blaschke, 2021). Within this space, learners' choices and decision-making activities transcend the physical and temporal boundaries of the traditional classroom, gaining unprecedented visibility, extensibility, and process-oriented representation. Students can leverage platforms to freely plan their learning pace and thematic exploration paths based on predefined knowledge maps. Through tools like digital journals or blogging platforms, they can continuously document language use, reflect on learning effectiveness, and proactively plan next steps (Zimmerman, 2008). These digital footprints become invaluable data for analyzing the development of their self-regulation skills. Learners can participate in discussions and vote on task themes and formats within online communities. Adaptive systems provide data-driven real-time feedback to guide students in optimizing subsequent learning strategy choices. The research form Godwin-Jones (2019) indicates that such immersive, highly interactive, and richly documented digital decision-making spaces not only significantly enhance learners' metacognitive awareness of their own cognitive processes but also effectively reduce the psychological burden and implementation risks of independent decision-making through immediate feedback and community interaction. Crucially, this allows decision-making competence to be tempered and enhanced efficiently through "learning by doing".

Concurrently, teachers leverage platform-generated learning analytics to provide more personalized decision guidance and resource recommendations, transforming autonomy support into precise, intelligent, situated scaffolding. This technology-supported decision-making environment ultimately fosters a more resilient and purpose-driven journey of foreign language self-exploration.

4. Future Research Directions

While autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching has demonstrated promise in its theoretical underpinnings and empirical validation, its further advancement necessitates addressing several critical research challenges.

Firstly, deepening theoretical integration and interdisciplinary dialogue is imperative. Current research predominantly relies on the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), yet often fails to adequately integrate key insights from Sociocultural Theory (e.g., Vygotsky (1978)'s Zone of Proximal Development) and Situated Learning perspectives (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Future work should proactively explore intersections with Cognitive Neuroscience and Motivational Psychology (e.g., investigating how autonomy support influences activation in brain regions associated with language processing) and develop longitudinal analytical models driven by Complex/Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2019) to reveal the non-linear trajectories of autonomy development.

Secondly, research on theoretical adaptation across cultural contexts must be significantly strengthened. Existing empirical data heavily relies on Western educational contexts (Reeve, 2006). The dynamic negotiation between "teacher authority" and "student autonomy" within collective cultures remains inadequately deconstructed. There is an urgent need for localized classroom ethnography to unpack how cultural scripts mediate the effectiveness of autonomy support, thereby preventing cultural silencing during theoretical translation and application.

Thirdly, innovation in methodology and practical translation constitutes another crucial dimension. Current empirical studies are dominated by short-term interventions

and self-report questionnaires (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), which are susceptible to social desirability bias and often fail to capture the lagged effects of behavioral change. We strongly recommend adopting mixed-methods approaches: combining real-time data (e.g., eye-tracking, physiological monitoring) with instructional design to form reciprocal validation, alongside developing longitudinal tracking databases and employing Latent Growth Curve Modeling to test the cumulative effects of autonomy support. The technologization pathway also requires moving beyond instrumental rationality. Future efforts should explore Human-Centered AI designs, ensuring technology serves as a medium to enhance, rather than erode, teacher-student intersubjectivity, and iteratively optimize technology-mediated autonomy support models through Design-Based Research (DBR) cycles.

5. Conclusion

Autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching represents not merely a pedagogical paradigm shift, but a fundamental reconstruction of educational philosophy. This article has systematically elucidated the core conceptual underpinnings and practical pathways of this model, clearly demonstrating that its essence lies far beyond simplistic ceding of control or tokenistic "free activity". Rather, it constitutes a sophisticated educational practice grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its meta-framework. This practice profoundly ignites intrinsic motivation by systematically fulfilling learners' three core psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and empowers them to become active regulators of the learning process and meaning constructors within their language acquisition journey.

The core contributions of this research are threefold: (1) Deepening the Theoretical Core. We clarify that autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching represents an educational ecology design intrinsically tied to human growth motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Its success hinges upon the teacher's role as a "supportive intervener" (Little, 2007), who employs nuanced strategies, such as context creation, process empowerment, emotional connection, and growth-oriented feedback, to guide learners across their Zone of Proximal Development. This facilitates a motivational transcendence from external regulation towards integrated internalization (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023). (2) Constructing an Integrated Practice System. We articulate how the core pathways, such as establishing a psychologically safe environment, designing intrinsically motivating tasks, granting learning decision-making agency, and implementing developmental assessment, are neither isolated nor independent. Instead, they form an interdependent, synergistic organic system. Fostering a safe exploratory environment serves as the cornerstone (Edmondson, 1999), crafting challenging tasks that connect personal value to social meaning functions as the engine (Dörnyei, 2009), and providing choices and decision-making space acts as the crucial lever for activating profound autonomy (Reinders & Benson, 2020). (3) Championing a Humanistic-Technological Synthesis. We underscore that while current AI-driven advancements, which involve adaptive learning systems, big data analytics, and hybrid physical-virtual environments, open new frontiers for personalized support (Godwin-Jones, 2019), their effective potential is intrinsically contingent on upholding human-centered values. Technology's core role lies in augmenting teacher perception and liberating their support capacity, never in replacing the teacher's indispensable function in meeting emotional needs, guiding value internalization, and stimulating critical thinking.

However, the meaningful implementation and deep-rooted adoption of autonomy-supportive foreign language teaching face persistent challenges, which requires further exploration: (1) Cultural Integration. Deeper investigation is needed into how to mindfully calibrate the dynamic equilibrium between "teacher guidance" and "student autonomy" within the framework of collectivist cultural traditions (Littlewood, 2000), thus avoiding the fragmentation of values resulting from cultural transplantation. (2) Teacher Development. Systematically cultivating the core competencies required for teacher role transformation constitutes a pivotal task for institutional support and professional growth (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). This entails shifting teachers from being knowledge transmitters to becoming designers of learning ecologies, motivational catalysts, emotional supporters, and guides in metacognitive dialogues. (3) Techno-Ethical Imperatives. Vigilance is paramount against the erosion of personalized care by efficiency-first ideology (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). We must ensure technology application serves to deepen, not distort, pedagogical relationships, ultimately striving to build a learner-needs-centered, adaptive ecosystem of "human-technology co-evolution".

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