

# AUTONOMY SUPPORT BEYOND THE LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOM

## A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Edited by **Jo Mynard** and **Scott J. Shelton-Strong**



PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

## PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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# 2 What It Means to ‘Take Ownership over One’s Own Learning’ in a Self-Determination Theory Analysis

Johnmarshall Reeve

*‘Individual development for students cannot be administered by a teacher – it has to be based in the students’ own awareness of what they want to learn and how they can go about it’*

(Eriksson, 1990: 22–23).

To bear fruit, language learning depends on two favorable conditions: (1) the learner’s willingness to take ownership over his or her own learning and (2) access to learning environments that support and are responsive to the learner’s inputs and initiatives. The first condition emanates from the learner’s autonomous motivation and depends on qualities of the learner. The second condition emanates from the environment’s capacity to meet the learner’s needs and depends on the qualities of the surrounding environment. But like two ships that pass unaware in the night, these two conditions often miss each other. Many autonomous language learners fail to find or create supportive physical and interpersonal surroundings for themselves, just as many supportive learning environments open their doors each day hoping to host absent autonomously motivated language learners. Recognizing this, the purpose of the present chapter is to identify the bridge that connects autonomous learners with their sought-after supportive surroundings. That bridge is the learner’s agency, or agentic engagement.

## Autonomy

In self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), autonomy is not a way of behaving or a way of managing one’s environment (e.g. making a plan, observing an expert role model, conversing with a partner, keeping a diary). Instead, autonomy is a motivational state that energizes and directs such ways of behaving and managing the environment. It is an inherent, ever-ready source of motivation that, when supported by environmental conditions, is fully capable of invigorating learners’ interest-taking, challenge-seeking, information assimilation (learning), volitional internalizations and proactive engagement with potential learning opportunities. Specifically, in SDT, autonomy is a psychological need. With a psychological need, what the person needs is a particular psychological experience: an experience that yields need satisfaction and, in so doing, fuels initiative, personal growth,

healthy development and well-being (i.e. what the person needs in order to be well and thrive; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020).

Autonomy is the need for personal ownership during one's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is the psychological need to experience self-direction and personal endorsement in the initiation and regulation of one's behavior. When deciding what to do, the learner wants the idea for the behavior to originate from within him or her and to express his or her personal interests and preferences. The learner wants to be the one who determines his or her actions and circumstances, rather than have someone force or make them do something. The learner wants to be the one who decides what to do, when to do it, how to do it, when to stop doing it and when and whether to do something else. The learner wants the choice to put himself or herself in one situation rather than in another.

The tell-tale signs that one is experiencing autonomy satisfaction are the emergent feelings of volition and self-endorsement. Volition is an unpressured willingness to engage in an activity, one that centers on how free (vs. coerced) the learner feels while acting (e.g. playing, studying, attending school) and while putting oneself in one situation rather than in another (e.g. 'I want to do x but not y'). Personal endorsement is a heartfelt sense of ownership over the action. It is an affirmative answer to questions such as: Is this my choice? Is this what I want to do?

For decades, language learning educators have recognized that autonomy does not equate to independent or individualistic learning (Benson, 2011). Autonomy requires a great deal of environmental support: it is an environmentally dependent source of motivation. Autonomy exists as a latent potential that energizes and directs volitional action only when it is environmentally supported (Bartholomew *et al.*, 2011). Thus, any analysis of the psychological need for autonomy necessarily includes a parallel analysis of the environmental conditions that support vs. hinder, undermine or thwart it (discussed in the next section). When autonomy is supported, it vitalizes the learner's energy and direction, and that energy manifests itself as intrinsic motivation, intrinsic goals, self-endorsed values and autonomously motivated types of extrinsic motivation (e.g. internalization, identified regulation) (Reeve *et al.*, 2022).

Briefly, *intrinsic motivation* is the inherent desire to seek out novelty and challenges, to explore new environments, to take interest in activities and new adventures, and to stretch and extend one's abilities (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Any goal is a forward-looking desired end-state, but a goal that affords the goal-striver with frequent and recurring opportunities to experience need satisfaction is an *intrinsic goal* (e.g. 'This goal pursuit allows me to feel free to do what I want to do, and to become the person I want to become') (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). A *self-endorsed value* is an internalized and personally accepted belief as to what is desirable and attractive ('For me, learning how to speak Korean is a desirable, attractive, and worthwhile thing to do'). Once integrated into the self-system, internalized beliefs serve as motivations to guide and inform the learner's choices, goals, attitudes, lifestyle, identity and sense of self (Ahn & Reeve, 2020).

Autonomy is an important motivational state because it predicts positive educational outcomes, such as learning, development, achievement and well-being. Experiment-based research studies show that increased autonomy satisfaction produces gains in each of the

following indices of adaptive functioning: engagement, agency, learning, skill development, positive self-concept, achievement, prosocial behavior and well-being, and produces declines in each of the following indices of maladaptive functioning: disengagement, amotivation, passivity, negative feelings, cheating, problematic relationships, antisocial behavior and bullying (for a review, see Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Somewhat in contrast to the SDT definition of autonomy, the classic definition of autonomy that has driven decades of research and analysis in language learning has been the following (from Dam *et al.*, 1990: 102):

Learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's own needs and purposes.

This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently *and* in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person.

An autonomous learner is an active participant in the social process of classroom learning, but also an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows. Accordingly, it is essential that an autonomous learner evolves an awareness of the aims and processes of learning and is capable of the critical reflection which syllabuses and curricula frequently require but traditional pedagogical measures rarely achieve. An autonomous learner knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage in her/his life.

The reason to highlight this classic definition is simply to point out that it is actually a definition of the autonomous learner *in action* (i.e. 'autonomous learning'; Benson, 2011). As such, the above definition nicely conceptualizes the essence of what the later part of this chapter will refer to as 'agency' or 'agentic engagement' (rather than autonomy per se). This is an important distinction to make because autonomy is the motivational force that energizes and directs the sort of 'taking charge of' and 'actively participating in one's own learning' described above.

As recognized by Benson (2011), autonomy cannot be taught, learned or acquired; instead, autonomy needs to be appreciated and supported. What this means in terms of both theory-building and practical application is that the existing understanding of 'learner autonomy' needs to be expanded from one overarching concept to three interrelated but differentiated concepts: namely, autonomy, environmental autonomy support and agentic engagement.

## **Environmental Autonomy Support**

Autonomy support is the adoption of a student focus and an understanding interpersonal tone that enables the skillful enactment of seven autonomy-satisfying instructional behaviors that serve two purposes: supporting intrinsic motivation and supporting internalization (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Those seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors are (Reeve *et al.*, 2022):

- take the student's perspective;
- invite the student to pursue his or her personal interests;
- present learning activities in autonomy-satisfying ways;
- provide explanatory rationales for requested behaviors;



- acknowledge and accept negative feelings;
- rely on invitational language; and
- display patience.

A student focus means that the environment takes a real interest in the learner's ideas, preferences and goals, and that the environment is willing to bend its offerings to align with the learner's preferences. An understanding tone is an effort to understand what the learner wants, needs and prefers. It is not giving in to the learner and is never a 'learner vs. environment' interaction; instead, it is the environment exercising empathy and care to work with the learner to help him or her successfully accomplish important tasks. Once an environment (e.g. conversation lounge, self-access center) adopts a student-focused and an understanding tone, then it becomes willing and able to provide the aforementioned seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors.

Almost all existing research on autonomy support has focused on the teacher (i.e. teacher-provided autonomy support), although this research also includes tutors, mentors, supervisors, coaches, parents, counselors, etc. In an outside-of-the-classroom learning context, the role of the teacher is not as central as it is in the in-classroom learning context. But autonomy support is still a very important construct in the study of out-of-the-classroom learning, and that is because there exists a multitude of additional opportunities for environmental autonomy support beyond the classroom teacher, including peers, peer climates, intrinsic goal pursuits, interesting and personally valued activities and environmental resources.

## Peer-provided autonomy support

Just as a teacher can support a learner's autonomy, so can a peer. This is especially true in those cases in which learners interact with peers who have similar interests and goals. Peers can be controlling and autonomythwarting, but peers can also engage in all the relationship-supportive behaviors that teachers do, including perspective taking, encouraging the learner to pursue his or her personal interests, acknowledging negative feelings and so forth. These dyadic peer interactions sometimes occur within a more general peer-to-peer social climate, as the language learner can interact with an autonomy-supportive peer, an autonomy-supportive peer group or both. In an autonomy-supportive peer climate, the learner can find (and be supported by) a group of peers who create norms, expectations, patterns of communication and group dynamics that emphasize improvement, interpersonal inclusion and working together (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). Autonomy support from a peer climate produces much the same benefits for the learner as does autonomy support from a teacher (Joesaar *et al.*, 2012).

## Intrinsic goal pursuit

A goal is a future-focused mental representation of a desired end state that guides behavior. According to self-determination theory, however, 'all goals are not created equal' (Ryan *et al.*, 1996: 21), as some goals are more energizing, beneficial and satisfying (intrinsic

goals) than are other goals (extrinsic goals). A goal is intrinsic if it puts the goal-striver on an inwardly oriented pathway of activity that opens up frequent and recurring opportunities to experience need satisfaction, especially autonomy satisfaction. Many learner goals can do this, but examples of prototypical intrinsic goals are those for personal growth, close relationships, and helping others (Niemiec *et al.*, 2009). Thus, a goal such as ‘I want to join a club that allows me to pursue my interests’ puts the goal-striver on an autonomy-satisfying pathway of activity, just as a goal such as ‘I am going to learn Spanish to connect more closely with my surrounding community’ puts the goal-striver on an autonomy-(and relatedness-) satisfying pathway of activity. The reason why intrinsic goal pursuits are especially beneficial is because the autonomy satisfaction they produce provides extra motivational support for greater effort, more goal progress, and greater well-being (Koestner, 2008). Thus, just as teachers, peers, and social climates can support autonomy, so can an intrinsic goal pursuit.

## Activity-based autonomy support

Activities vary in how interesting and how personally important they are to the learner. Learners find some activities to be highly interesting, and one of the defining features of what makes an activity an interesting thing to do is the extent to which the activity can provide the learner with an experience of psychological need satisfaction (Deci, 1992). If a learner finds language learning or interacting with fellow language learners or visiting a foreign country to be an autonomy-satisfying thing to do (e.g. ‘I feel free’, ‘This is something I want to do’, ‘Doing this activity allows me to be my true self’), then that activity will be experienced as an interesting, enjoyable activity, because the ‘satisfaction’ in ‘need satisfaction’ is nearly synonymous with an experience of interest, enjoyment and pleasure (Reeve & Lee, 2019). To the extent that an interesting activity enables autonomy satisfaction, then, that activity is an autonomy support.

Similarly, even uninteresting activities can be autonomy-satisfying and hence an autonomy support. Autonomy is defined via experiences of personal ownership, self-direction, volition and self-endorsement. Interesting activities produce these experiences, but so can uninteresting activities – at least as long as they are perceived to be important, valuable and personally useful. The belief that this activity ‘is a useful, worthwhile thing to do’ supports not intrinsic motivation but internalization. Internalization is the process of taking in values, beliefs and ways of behaving from social sources and transforming them into one’s own (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Once a value, belief or way of behaving has been fully internalized by the learner, it gains the capacity to generate subjective experiences of personal ownership, self-direction, volition and self-endorsement (Reeve *et al.*, 2002). This is true even if the activity itself is an inherently uninteresting thing to do (e.g. studying for hours and hours). Thus, just as task interest fuels autonomy satisfaction (via intrinsic motivation), so can a sense of task value, usefulness and importance (via internalization).

## Resource-based autonomy support

A final environmental source of autonomy support occurs in all those opportunities and

resources afforded by a surrounding (physical) environment. Through clubs, organizations, programs, places to go and technology (e.g. Duolingo app), the learner can find sources of autonomy support. Resource-based sources of autonomy support have not yet been investigated in the self-determination theory research literature, but the language learner literature seems ripe for investigating this source of autonomy support. Any journey in learning a foreign language offers many need-supportive places to go (e.g. conversation lounges, writing centers, community events, self-access centers, learning advising/counseling services) as well as technology-rich resources and tools to interact with, and the learner's engagement with these sorts of opportunities and resources is likely to produce need-satisfying experiences.

## Agentic Engagement

An agent is someone who intentionally influences their surrounding circumstances (Bandura, 2006). In the context of (formal and informal) education, *intentionally influencing one's circumstances* means contributing constructively to and shaping the conditions under which one learns and develops. By acting on, changing, improving and negotiating with the environments in which they learn and develop, learners gain greater capacity to change their lives for the better.

Agentic engagement is the action, behavior and personal initiative that the agent undertakes in order to change their functioning and circumstances for the better (Reeve, 2013). It is what learners say and do to create more motivationally supportive social and physical environments for themselves – offer input, personalize the learning experience, communicate likes and dislikes, ask for a say in what to do and how to do it, etc. Its opposite is passivity (or 'agentic disengagement'; Reeve, Cheon & Yu, 2020). The passive learner simply receives and accepts 'as is' whatever learning opportunities, learning partners, instruction, mentors, goals, activities, resources, events and circumstances happen to come his or her way. In contrast, the agentially engaged learner is full of personal initiative and is constantly striving to improve upon and contribute constructively to the betterment of the learning opportunities, learning partners, instruction, mentors, goals, activities, resources, events and circumstances that he or she makes sure come his or her way.

Agentic engagement is both proactive and reciprocal. Proactively, agentially engaged learners take action before a learning experience begins, by creating and shaping the social and physical environment in which the learning will take place. In doing so, the hope is that the environment will be increasingly supportive and responsive and therefore better able to help the learner realize their goals and plans for the learning experience. Reciprocally, agentially engaged learners seek a pattern of interaction with the environment in which they communicate their interests, needs, plans and goals so that the environment will adapt what it has to offer and, in so doing, become better able to support the learner's expressed interests, needs, plans and goals. When environments are both responsive and supportive, the learner will tend to be changed by that supportive environment by developing new and better interests, needs, plans and goals. Overall, agentic engagement is a learner-initiated pathway to recruit (and benefit from) a more motivationally supportive learning environment.

A focus on agentic engagement often raises the question of how it is different from behavioral engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to the observable action that learners take to be on-task and exert effort. It is typically conceptualized and measured in terms of one's effort and persistence (Skinner *et al.*, 2009); but it also involves participating, completing tasks and adhering to rules. The difference between the two is that behavioral engagement is largely reactive – the learner receives a task or assignment (e.g. read the book, participate in the discussion) and then responds with some level of attention, effort, persistence and participation. Agentic engagement, on the other hand, is proactive. The learner seeks out their own interesting book or discussion partners. There is a lot of attention, effort, persistence and participation in both these types of engagement, but the effort that arises out of behavioral engagement is a reaction to learning challenges and opportunities supplied by others, while the effort that arises out of agentic engagement is the proactive creation of one's own learning challenges and opportunities. This distinction is important because learners who display both behavioral and agentic engagement make greater academic progress than do learners who display only behavioral engagement (Reeve, Cheon & Jang, 2020).

Agentic engagement enables two key outcomes. First, greater agentic engagement improves the learner's functioning, as increased agentic engagement predicts increased learning, skill development, and performance (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). For instance, agentially engaged learners make better grades than do their non-agentially engaged peers (Reeve, Cheon & Jang, 2020). Agentially engaged learners simply learn more and learn better than do agentially disengaged students (Reeve, Cheon & Yu, 2020). So, the first reason why agentic engagement is important is because it represents a productive pathway to build skills and to make academic progress.

Second, greater agentic engagement improves the circumstances under which one learns and develops, as increased agentic engagement predicts how much the environment changes to accommodate the learner's interests, needs and goals. In a series of studies, we assessed agentially engaged students (in a classroom setting) at the beginning of the academic year to test the hypothesis that students' agentic engagement would, over time, bring out greater autonomy support from their teachers. These studies were all longitudinal in design and the consistent findings were: (1) the more agentially engaged that students were at the beginning of the semester, the more autonomy supportive their teachers became toward them by the end of the semester; and (2) the more agentially disengaged that students were at the beginning of the semester, the less autonomy supportive their teachers became toward them by the end of the semester (Matos *et al.*, 2018; Reeve, 2013; Reeve, Cheon & Yu, 2020). Of these two findings relating to how agentic engagement translates into learning and academic progress, the role that agentic engagement plays in recruiting a more motivationally supportive environment for oneself seems to be primary (Reeve *et al.*, 2021).

We have not yet studied agentic engagement empirically in the *outside of the classroom* environment, but there are multiple opportunities for agentially engaged learners to improve the circumstances under which they learn and develop. As mentioned in other chapters in the volume, learning outside the classroom affords learners with potential access to a multitude of resources and opportunities, including (1) sources of social support, such as teachers,

advisors, mentors, coaches, role models, counselors and peer collaborators, (2) community offerings and authentic settings, (3) physical environments, such as language laboratories, writing centers and conversation lounges, (4) technology resources, such as ‘how to’ audiobooks, apps (smartphone applications) and language software that offers modeling, feedback and practice opportunities, and (5) a host of additional resources, materials and whatever else the aspiring language learner feels he or she needs to improve skills and attain goals.

To capitalize on these opportunities and resources, language learners have a multitude of ways they can ‘take ownership over their own learning’. To do so, autonomously motivated, agentially engaged learners can seek out autonomy supportive teachers and peers, set and pursue intrinsic goals, choose which activities and which materials to spend time with, decide for themselves how to go about the task of learning and improving, explore the surroundings to find new and better ways to learn, find others who share one’s interests and goals, ask competent others for guidance and support, find expert role models to observe and emulate, develop the standards necessary to evaluate one’s work, find experts who can evaluate one’s work objectively and offer constructive suggestions, and basically take responsibility for their own learning and developing.

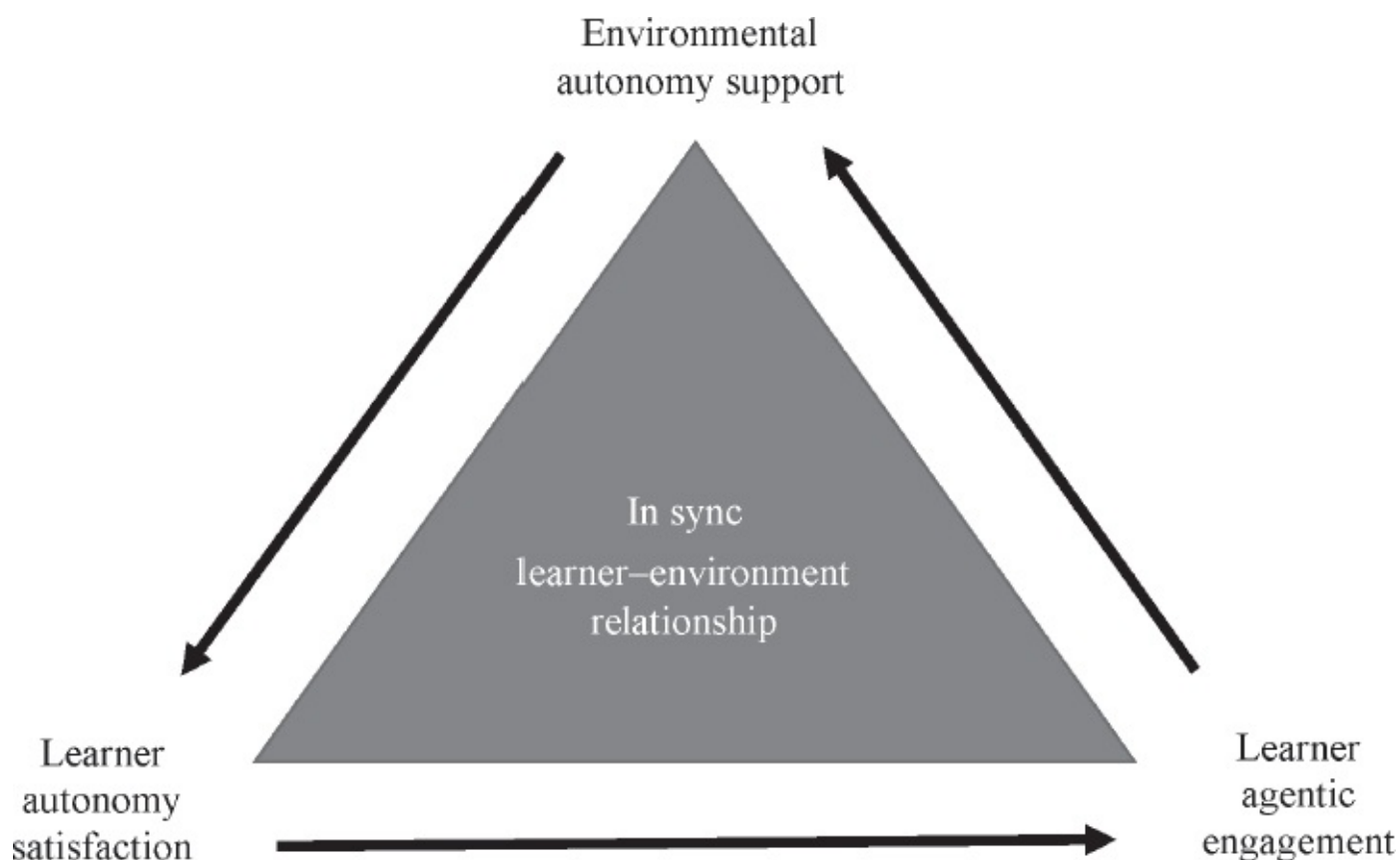
Essentially, what agentially engaged learners do is, first, clarify and give voice to what they want and need, second, continuously problemsolve to understand what resources and opportunities they need to meet their goals and improve their skills, and third, take the initiative to create or put themselves in the environments that will best allow them to fulfill their interests, develop their skills, learn new things and surround themselves with the people, resources and sources of support they need.

## **Integrating Autonomy, Autonomy Support and Agentic Engagement**

How a learner’s autonomy, environmental autonomy support and agentic engagement fit together can be seen in Figure 2.1. Autonomy need satisfaction is agentic engagement’s motivational fuel. Agentic engagement then recruits greater environmental autonomy support, just as agentic disengagement (passivity) minimizes it. Finally, the extent of environmentally provided autonomy support explains experiences of autonomy satisfaction (vs. frustration), which fuels further agentic engagement in a self-reinforcing loop. As represented by the triangle in the center of the figure, the learner and learning environment become increasingly in sync with one another when autonomy support fuels autonomy satisfaction, autonomy satisfaction fuels agentic engagement, and agentic engagement fuels environmental autonomy support.

If the environment is unresponsive to or frustrates the learner’s need for autonomy, the likely motivational experience is one of autonomy frustration rather than one of autonomy satisfaction. Autonomy frustration leads to agentic disengagement. Exhibiting such disengagement, the learner fails to take the initiative needed to otherwise pull greater autonomy support from their surrounding environment. Under these conditions, the learner–environment relationship dissolves into two independent actors, as little of what the learner does changes or improves the surrounding environment and the surrounding environment in

turn offers little to support the learner’s need for autonomy. If the environment changes from need-neglect to outright need-thwart (i.e. a controlling environment), then the learner–environment relationship deteriorates into conflict (me vs. you).



**Figure 2.1** Interconnections among autonomy, autonomy support and agentic engagement

The triangular relations depicted in Figure 2.1 have no obvious starting point, as each element is both cause and consequence to the other two. The environment can change from non-supportive to autonomy supportive and this change tends to increase learners’ autonomy need satisfaction (Cheon *et al.*, 2019). The learner can experience greater autonomy need satisfaction and this change tends to increase learners’ agentic engagement (Reeve, Cheon & Yu, 2020). In other words, the learner can initiate greater agentic engagement and this change tends to render the learning environment significantly more autonomy supportive (Reeve, 2013).

Learners can be provided with a brief training experience in how to be more agentially engaged. Such a training session has been shown to be effective (Reeve *et al.*, 2021). In this experiment, learners received a brief 10-minute training session in how to be more agentially engaged while interacting with a teacher. Learners were encouraged to take the initiative, speak up, express their preferences, make a plan for what questions to ask and what resources to request and let the teacher know what they needed and were most interested in. Compared to a control group of learners, learners who received the brief ‘be agentic’ training session did recruit greater autonomy support from their teachers and, because of this greater autonomy support, experienced greater autonomy need satisfaction during the learning experience. The data collected from this experiment provide supportive empirical evidence

for the model depicted in Figure 2.1. The data further suggest that ‘greater agentic engagement’ can function as a starting point to set in motion the reciprocal processes that result in greater learner–environment synchrony.

In looking at the relations depicted in Figure 2.1, the following take-home message can be offered. Agentic engagement makes for an excellent starting point to jumpstart the cycle depicted in Figure 2.1, especially since agentic engagement reflects the spirit of the chapter’s title so well (i.e. ‘Take ownership over one’s own learning’). We suggest agentic engagement as a starting point because such an intervention experience could be designed and implemented (in the spirit of the Reeve *et al.*, 2021 experiment). That said, it is an important point to acknowledge that autonomy-infused agentic engagement is much more fruitful than is autonomy-empty agentic engagement. Somehow, autonomy, autonomy support and agency need to come together in a self-sustaining cycle. How this might be achieved seems like a promising challenge to future research and practice in language learning outside the classroom.

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