

# Learner Agency under Exam-Oriented Education: An Ecological Perspective in the EFL Context

Jiang Xinyi

*Chongqing Normal University, Shapingba, Chongqing, China*

**Abstract:** In EFL settings focused on exams, learner agency is usually regarded as limited. High-risk testing is the main cause of this restriction. It is generally believed that there is a clear boundary between a true agent and merely abiding by the rules. This article opposes this view. Students do not merely accept the restrictions of the system. They work actively with them, adapt to them, and use them in smart ways. This study drew on the chord triad model. It also adopts an ecological perspective. It explores how learner agency are established, put into action and maintained when there is exam pressure. This study adopts a sequential interpretation design using a mixed method. We conducted a survey among 450 undergraduate students from three universities in China. We obtained 436 valid answers from the survey. We also conducted semi-structured interviews. Ten carefully selected people participated in these interviews. the results show that the students have medium to high initiative. This is true even under the heavy pressure of exams. Managing resources is the most obvious function. Regression analysis reveals some important things. Projective and practical-evaluative agency are helpful in predicting English academic performance, whereas iterational agency did not have a significant predictive effect. Qualitative analysis identified three learner profiles: alienated resisters, compliant performers, and strategic navigators. This paper suggests strategic compliance. It's a type of agency linked to certain cultures. It's more common in Confucian Heritage Culture places. Generative AI acts as a key digital tool. It makes work more efficient. It gives students more chance to get personalized help. It builds spaces that focus on learners. These spaces are outside classrooms that only focus on exams. the study comes to a conclusion. Exam-focused education doesn't get rid of learner agency. the study concludes that

**exam-oriented education does not eliminate learner agency but reshapes it into strategic, adaptive, future-oriented, and technology-mediated forms.**

**Keywords:** Learner Agency; Exam-Oriented Education; EFL; High-Stakes Testing; Strategic Compliance; Generative AI

## 1. Introduction

Language education is available in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, which is formed by two opposite forces. Modern teaching emphasizes communicative skills. It also values critical thinking, emphasizes genuine interaction, and cares about learner-centered growth. Meanwhile, high-risk examinations still control course design and also influence teaching methods and learners' behaviors. This contradiction is more obvious in China. For instance, some examinations have a strong impact on classroom practice, including the English section of the college entrance Examination and the CET-4 and CET-6. These exams usually emphasize rote learning, encourage repetitive practice, focus on grammar teaching, and encourage learning merely for scores. Therefore, exam-oriented education has received a lot of criticism: it makes the curriculum narrower and limits the opportunities to use language in a meaningful way.

It is wrong to say that learners in such an environment submit to the control of institutions. Even in these limited schools, students still make their own decisions. They manage their time and resources, set personal goals, seek help when needed, and create opportunities to learn outside the classroom. In recent years, digital technology has become increasingly common. Specifically, generative AI tools like ChatGPT, Doubao, and deepseek enable learners to be more capable of exercising agency. These tools enable them to do this in a flexible and personalized way. These technological advances mean we need a better understanding of learner agency. This

understanding goes beyond the simple split between following exam rules and real learning. This paper, therefore, looks at learner agency in exam-focused EFL education. It uses an ecological perspective to do this. the study asks three key questions. First, how do learners build and keep their agency when facing institutional limits? Second, how do the time-related parts of agency work together in exam-driven settings? Third, how do digital tools help support agentic learning? By answering these questions, the study aims to add to two areas. It contributes to the theory of learner agency. It also helps with practical talks about EFL teaching, assessment, and AI integration.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 From Learner Autonomy to Ecological Agency**

Most of the early research on learner agency defined this concept in some way. It focuses on personal independence, self-control and personal choice. Usually, this research is combined with studies on learners' autonomy. These contributions are important, but these works often overlook the context. It also neglects social relations, institutional rules and cultural expectations. On the contrary, it regards agency as a relatively fixed personal ability. Later social and cultural perspectives expanded this understanding. They indicated that agency is closely related to identity, investment, power and access to resources. Learners do not act alone. On the contrary, their behaviors are influenced by the opportunities and restrictions in the social environment.

The ecological perspective goes even further. Initiative is not merely something that learners possess; By contrast, they achieve this goal through the interaction of personal efforts, environmental tools and structural conditions. This is not a choice between two extremes. Even in a highly regulated education system, learners can demonstrate initiative. It is possible if they can understand the constraints, gather resources and take clear actions towards current and future goals. This ecological perspective is particularly helpful for understanding the examination-centered EFL environment. In these settings, different learners may feel the same structural pressure in very different ways.

### **2.2 The Chordal Triad of Agency**

This study employs the Chordal Triad model to put ecological perspectives into practice. This model defines an agent as a time-related achievement. It has three interrelated parts: internationality, practicality, evaluability and planning. International institutions rely on past experiences, habits and previous learning procedures. For the practice evaluation agent, learners make judgments that conform to the context and adapt to the current moment. Project agency is related to future goals, imagined paths and long-term purposes. These three dimensions cannot function independently, instead, they work together to shape meaningful action over time.

In exam-focused EFL learning, iterational agency can be seen in familiar test-prep habits. It also appears in learned routines and memories of past success or failure. Practical-evaluative agency shows up in how learners react to exam demands as they happen. For example, they manage stress, choose strategies, or decide where to focus their effort. Projective agency is visible in learners' future plans. These plans include hopes of studying abroad, getting ahead in their career, or truly mastering the language. the Chordal Triad model helps make sense of a key question. Why do learners facing the same institutional pressure end up with such different strategies and attitudes? the answer lies in their unique combination - everyone's past experiences, current judgments and future goals are different.

### **2.3 Strategic Compliance and Digital Affordances**

This study resolves another issue from earlier research. This is a tendency to believe that obedience is the opposite of agency. Many Western-based frameworks associate agency with independence, resistance or opposition to institutional rules. However, in the context of traditional Confucian culture, compliance is not always passive or thoughtless. Students may follow the examination requirements for practical reasons. Doing so helps them obtain qualification certificates, expand opportunities and ensure long-term mobility. When looked at this way, compliance becomes strategic instead of just submissive. This is a key point for the present study. We treat strategic compliance as a form of agency rooted in specific cultural contexts.

This study also explores the role of digital and social tools in supporting learner agents. Especially generative artificial intelligence, it has changed the way language is learned. It offers explanations, feedback, summaries, practice opportunities and personalized assistance when needed. the classroom is often crowded with people, or they are concentrating on the exam. In these places, these tools can create a separate space centered on learners. In this space, students strive towards goals that cannot be fully met by formal teaching. Technology has not taken away people's initiative. On the contrary, it may promote economic growth. It makes adaptive action easier and helps learners keep doing it over time.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study adopts a sequential interpretation hybrid method design. First of all, researchers collected quantitative data. Then, qualitative data helps to understand these figures. In the quantitative section, researchers investigated 450 college students. These students come from three public universities in China. After eliminating invalid questionnaires, the study obtained 436 valid answers. the effective response rate was 96.9%. These students come from different grades and majors. Their English proficiency is also different. All were taking required College English courses and preparing for high-stakes exams like CET-4 or CET-6.

In the qualitative part, the researchers deliberately selected 10 participants. They selected these people from the survey sample. Then, the study selected them to cover a range of institutional levels. It also includes different majors, grades, self-reported English skills and examination experiences. This method enables interviews to capture the experiences and perspectives of many different learners. It helps us understand two key things. We not only saw how many agency the learners had, but also how and why the agency took different forms.

#### 3.2 Instruments and Data Analysis

The study employed a self-developed scale, the *Learner Agency in EFL Scale* (LAES), based on ecological agency theory and the Chordal Triad framework. It has 20 Likert type projects. These projects use a five-point scale to measure four aspects. These fields include intentionality and

planning, resource management, social mediation and emotional regulation. This scale has good psychological measurement quality. For instance, Cronbach's alpha value is 0.87. the score range of each subscale is from 0.76 to 0.82. the KMO value was 0.82, and the Bartlett test was significant. Confirmatory factor analysis also showed the model fit well. These results proved the scale was reliable and valid for this study.

For the quantitative data, researchers ran three types of analysis. They did descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. Qualitative data came from online semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. They covered topics like exam pressure, strategy use, digital tools, learning goals, and how learners saw agency. Researchers analyzed interview transcripts using thematic analysis. This analysis included open, axial, and selective coding. Coders did the coding on their own, without working together. the inter-coder consistency reached a Cohen's Kappa of 0.87. Finally, researchers combined the quantitative and qualitative results. This triangulation helped create a complete picture of learner agency in exam-focused EFL education.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

The descriptive statistics showed learner agency remained moderate to high overall, with a mean score of 3.52 on a five-point scale. Among the four dimensions, resource management was the highest ( $M = 3.78$ ), followed by intentionality and planning ( $M = 3.57$ ), affective regulation ( $M = 3.43$ ), and social mediation ( $M = 3.26$ ). These findings run against the assumption that exam pressure necessarily kills learner initiative. Instead, learners appear able to mobilize tools, materials, and strategies effectively, even under strong institutional constraints.

Correlation analysis also showed positive links between all four agency dimensions and self-reported English achievement. the strongest correlation was found for *resource management* ( $r = .46$ ), followed by *intentionality and planning* ( $r = .38$ ), then *affective regulation* ( $r = .32$ ), and finally *social mediation* ( $r = .28$ ). This suggests that learners who handle resources well—including digital tools—tend to do better academically.

The regression analysis offers a more precise

picture of the temporal dynamics of agency. the overall model was significant ( $F = 42.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .27$ ), indicating that the three Chordal Triad dimensions explained 27% of the variance in English achievement. Among these dimensions, *practical-evaluative agency* ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and *projective agency* ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predicted achievement, whereas *iterational agency* ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .216$ ) did not. In other words, success in exam-oriented EFL learning was more strongly related to learners' present adaptive judgment and future-oriented purpose than to habitual reliance on past routines alone.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis identified three relatively stable learner profiles. the first group, *strategic navigators*, demonstrated strong projective agency. These learners had clear long-term goals and viewed examinations as temporary stepping stones rather than ultimate ends. They used generative AI to summarize reading passages, streamline repetitive tasks, and free time for more authentic listening, speaking, and self-directed learning. For them, exam success was instrumental, not final.

The second group, *compliant performers*, showed strong iterational agency but weaker projective orientation. They followed teacher instructions closely, engaged in repeated drills, memorized vocabulary, and focused on passing required tests. Although they often worked hard, their actions were driven more by routine and institutional expectation than by a clearly articulated future vision. Their learning was effortful but not always strategically directed.

The third group, *alienated resisters*, displayed low agency across dimensions. These learners felt disconnected from exam-oriented English learning and often described exam English as artificial, meaningless, or irrelevant to real communication. Their response to the system was not productive resistance but withdrawal, frustration, and disengagement. This profile is important because it shows that agency does not always take positive or effective forms; under some conditions, it may appear as avoidance or passive resistance.

#### 5. Discussion

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the idea of strategic compliance. We should not take it for granted that adhering to

examination requirements means being passive or lacking initiative. In this case, many learners deliberately choose to obey. They do this because they think that exams are a way to obtain future opportunities. Learners strive to prepare for the exam. This is not because the system has completely controlled them. On the contrary, this is because they have made reasonable and future-oriented choices within the system. This view is particularly important in the context of traditional Confucian culture. In these settings, diligence and adapting to institutional expectations can go hand in hand with a strong personal purpose. Strategic compliance therefore makes the simple split between resistance and submission more complex. This split has influenced most earlier theories about agency.

The findings also show that generative AI plays a key role as a mediating affordance. With the support of AI, learning can become more efficient. It takes less time to finish repetitive tasks. Learners can get feedback quickly, too. They also get flexible learning spaces that go beyond regular classrooms. AI doesn't take away learners' agency. In fact, it often helps learners act more purposefully and on their own. Even so, what AI can do depends on how learners use it. Learners who use AI strategically saved time and energy. They used that time for the learning that really mattered. For learners with weaker agency, digital tools alone didn't help much. If they had no clear future goals or couldn't adapt, technology by itself couldn't help them develop useful agency.

Another major point of note has to do with how we understand exams. This study doesn't claim that high-stakes testing isn't limiting. However, it does indicate that exams can serve as a type of support system. For some learners, exams provide structure and clear goals. They also offer accountability and clear progress checkpoints. These elements help learners keep up their effort. From an ecological perspective, constraints don't always take away learners' agency. Sometimes, they might even help organize it. the key question here is: can learners connect structural requirements to meaningful goals? Can they make flexible decisions and gain access to useful resources?

#### 6. Conclusion

This study says that learner agency in exam-oriented EFL settings is not fixed. It changes

with context. It also takes shape over time. So agency isn't just there or not there. Numbers from the study show that learners still have a moderate-to-high level of agency even when exams push hard on them. Two kinds matter most for English grades: projective agency and practical-evaluative agency. The qualitative findings give us three different learner profiles. Agency can show up as strategic navigation, habitual compliance, or alienated withdrawal. Most important, the study puts forward strategic compliance as a form of agency that comes from culture. It also points to generative AI as a key digital affordance. That affordance expands what learners can do.

These findings count for both theory and practice. Basically, they boost eco views of agency by telling that obeying, adjusting, and tech use can all count as big learner action. So, they say three ways for EFL teaching. First, teaching should go from control to support. Second, knowing AI should be part of English teaching. Third, test change should see how learners plan and do, not only their exam marks. And also, the study tells us exam-prep teaching does not kill learner agency. Instead, it turns that agency into kinds that are smart, quick, forward looking, and tech-mediated.

## References

- [1] Checcucci Enrico, Piramide Federico, De Cillis Sabrina, et al. Health Information Technology Usability Evaluation Scale and User-Experience Questionnaire for 3D Intraoperative Cognitive Navigation System for Urological Procedures[J]. *Medicina*, 2023, 59(3):624-624.
- [2] Zhou X, Sidhu K G, Wang L. Academic buoyancy in EFL learning: A mixed-methods study among Chinese private university students.[J]. *Acta psychologica*, 2026, 267106990.
- [3] Biesta G ,Tedder M. Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective[J]. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 2007, 39(2):132-149.
- [4] Zhang Q ,Jing S. Predicting online learning persistence in EFL contexts: The interplay of L2 grit, self-efficacy, and learner satisfaction[J]. *Acta Psychologica*, 2026, 264106484-106484.
- [5] Hu B ,West A. Exam-oriented education and implementation of education policy for migrant children in urban China[J]. *Educational Studies*, 2015, 41(3):249-267.
- [6] Blair V D .Learner agency: To understand and to be understood[J]. *British Journal of Music Education*, 2009, 26(2):173-187.