

Gender Differences for Middle School Students' Agentic Engagement in Oral English Learning

Changhui Bao

Wuluolu Middle School, Wuhan, China

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, oral English competence is vital, and learners' proactive agency plays a key role in their achievement in oral English learning. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a useful lens for examining learners' motivation in oral English acquisition. This study investigated middle school learners' agentic engagement in oral English and examined gender-based differences grounded in SDT, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined questionnaires with semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate a generally moderate level of agentic engagement, with notable gender differences across certain dimensions. Male students scored higher on "independent study," "assisting teachers," and "supporting classmates," whereas no gender gap was observed in "cooperating with teachers." Additionally, the four core components of SDT show positive associations with agentic engagement. Interview data highlight that engagement is shaped by internal factors and external influences. The results suggest pedagogical implications that educators should emphasize self-determined motivation, cultivate supportive learning contexts, and implement gender-responsive strategies.

Keywords

Agentic engagement; self-determination theory; oral English learning; gender difference.

1. Introduction

English, as a global lingua franca, increasingly influences students' academic trajectories and future opportunities. Mastery of oral English is a crucial element of language competence, fostering communicative ability and intercultural understanding. Consequently, fluent oral English is considered not only a core language skill but also a marker of global talents in countries of other languages.

Self-Determination Theory, a psychological model that foregrounds autonomy and self-directedness in behavior, suggests that gender may affect learners' agency in oral English, although such differences are not absolute—each learner has distinctive preferences and expressions of agency. Therefore, teachers should recognize individual variability, help learners capitalize on their strengths, and provide tailored support to boost agency and active participation. Autonomy in learning denotes the capacity to manage and regulate one's own learning—setting goals, selecting content and strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Contemporary scholarship increasingly endorses the view that learners, rather than teachers, should shoulder responsibility for their learning[1]. Applying SDT enables a deeper understanding of middle school students' agentic engagement in oral English learning and the exploration of gender-related patterns.

Prior research has primarily examined agentic engagement in reading and writing, with relatively little focus on oral English learning. Studies addressing gender differences in agentic participation in oral English are also limited. Hence, this study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating middle school students' agentic engagement in oral English learning and

comparing male and female learners. Using surveys and interviews, the study will first assess learners' agentic engagement in oral English—covering classroom behavior, participation, and enthusiasm. The study will then analyze how SDT's three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) relate to oral English learning and whether these relations differ by gender. In addition, it will propose pedagogical recommendations to enhance agentic engagement in oral English learning. Finally, the study will contribute to the current literature and inform educators and policymakers while providing implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-determination theory

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was proposed by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan[2] in 1985. It emerged from their inquiry into human motivation and the reasons behind people's choices and actions. Building upon behaviorist traditions and the hierarchy of needs, Deci and Ryan[2] emphasized intrinsic motivation and fundamental psychological needs. Their work demonstrated that excessive external rewards and controlling conditions can undermine intrinsic motivation and autonomy, whereas fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters positive motivation and psychological well-being[2]. Over subsequent decades, Deci and Ryan[3] further refined SDT through extensive research, and today the theory is widely applied in education, management, health, and counseling.

Self-determination theory serves as a psychological framework centered on the fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness[4]. It posits that individuals are motivated to fulfill these three psychological requirements to achieve optimal well-being and personal development. At the heart of SDT lies the notion of autonomy—defined as the desire for control over one's actions in alignment with personal values and interests.

During adolescence, fostering autonomy is crucial for individual development as it contributes to personal growth, nurtures positive relationships, and improves overall well-being. Autonomy comprises emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects that manifest differently across contexts such as general situations or specific relational dynamics involving parents or peers[5]. A sense of agency arises when individuals feel they have ownership over their actions; acting autonomously leads to increased satisfaction and fulfillment. The second essential need within SDT is competence—the drive to feel effective in one's actions. Humans possess an intrinsic urge to acquire new skills and master abilities[6]. Engaging in challenging activities that promote growth fosters a feeling of competence along with a sense of accomplishment. The third need identified by SDT is relatedness; this pertains to the inherent desire for meaningful connections with others. As social beings, humans require social bonds for their well-being. Reeve & Shin[6] suggest that when individuals experience belongingness alongside positive relationships with others, they report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

According to SDT principles, fulfilling these three needs enhances intrinsic motivation—the drive originating internally from personal interests or enjoyment—which correlates with higher engagement levels, persistence in tasks, and creativity in various activities. Conversely, unmet needs may lead to extrinsic motivation driven by external rewards or pressures. Tian[7] notes that extrinsic motivation tends to be less sustainable and can evoke feelings of resentment or disengagement. Furthermore, SDT underscores the necessity of supportive environments in satisfying these psychological needs; environments promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitate improved well-being and optimal functioning while controlling settings may impede motivation and overall wellness.

2.2. Students' agentic engagement in oral English learning

Engagement is regarded as a crucial element in the learning and teaching process, characterized by students' active participation in educational activities. In recent years, Bandura[8] introduced the concept of learner agency, which encompasses learners setting objectives, devising plans, selecting strategies, and assessing results. The primary goal of fostering learner agency is to promote autonomy and self-regulation among students, empowering them to be proactive and engage in lifelong learning.

Reeve and Tseng[9] identified another important aspect of engagement known as agentic engagement. This term describes the proactive and constructive ways in which students seek to influence their educational experience to enhance their motivation and learning outcomes[10]. Through agentic engagement, students are empowered to actively enrich the learning content, improve the educational environment, and tailor their learning experiences rather than merely absorbing information passively or following teacher-led instructions.

To investigate the factors that impact students' agentic engagement, Albaqawi and Nageeb[11] conducted a study involving random sampling that yielded 681 valid responses from college students with online learning experience. However, this study did not address agentic engagement specifically within the context of oral English learning. Shi[12] aims to examine the learner agency among Chinese university English learners in developing their spoken English skills. This research centers on understanding how various factors influence learner agency. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, classroom observations, and field notes, analyzed via qualitative thematic analysis. Findings indicate that elements affecting students' initiative in oral learning include their previous experiences, aspirations for the future, and the current environment they operate within.

2.3. The influence of gender differences in oral English learning

Gender differences can significantly influence the process of learning oral English[13]. It is essential to recognize the considerable variability among individuals within each gender; however, certain general trends and effects can be identified. One key element related to gender differences in oral English learning is the style of communication. Zhao[14] indicated that females often exhibited greater verbal expressiveness and higher verbal fluency than males. This advantage may facilitate their oral English learning as they typically feel more at ease and self-assured when articulating their thoughts. Conversely, males might display a more assertive and competitive communication style, which could influence their experiences in learning spoken English.

Another important consideration involves societal expectations and stereotypes. In various cultures, traditional gender roles may dictate how males and females are anticipated to communicate[15]. For instance, females might be encouraged to adopt a more polite and collaborative tone in their conversations, whereas males may be expected to communicate in a more direct and assertive manner. These societal norms can shape how individuals engage with oral English learning and affect their communication approaches.

Moreover, factors such as self-confidence and self-perception also contribute to the gender disparities observed in oral English acquisition. According to Li[15], females may possess higher levels of self-esteem and confidence regarding language learning compared to their male counterparts. This heightened self-assurance can promote their readiness to take risks and actively engage in oral English activities. In contrast, males might face increased pressure to succeed and feel more apprehensive about making errors, which could impede their progress in mastering spoken English.

The review of literature highlights that current research has mainly explored gender differences within the focus on language acquisition. However, this study intends to offer a distinctive viewpoint by targeting agentic engagement of middle school students. This

perspective considers students' engagement levels, motivation, and self-regulation throughout the learning journey—shedding light on how gender dynamics impact students' agency in spoken English development. Additionally, this study facilitates an enriched understanding of variations in motivation, self-regulation, and overall involvement in spoken English learning across genders.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

Drawing from existing literature on students' agentic engagement, oral English learning, and gender differences in language acquisition, this study aims to examine the current state of agentic engagement among middle school oral English learners and to identify distinctions between male and female participants. The study seeks to address three primary questions:

- a. What is the level of agentic engagement among middle school students in oral English learning, and are there any notable differences between genders?
- b. How does self-determination motivation relate to agentic engagement for male and female middle school oral English learners?
- c. What factors impact the agentic engagement of male and female middle school oral English learners?

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 120 second-year middle school students (60 boys and 60 girls) from a middle school in Hubei Province, where learning oral English forms part of their curriculum. They were conveniently sampled. Each student participated in an average of ten English classes weekly, focusing on developing effective oral communication skills under the guidance of their instructors.

3.3. Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Initially, questionnaires were administered to assess participants' levels of engagement, motivation, and perceived proficiency concerning oral English learning as they relate to the first two research questions. To gain deeper insights into the factors influencing students' agentic engagement, semi-structured interviews were conducted thereafter. This qualitative component allowed for an exploration of students' viewpoints, experiences, and intrinsic motivations regarding their acquisition of oral English.

3.3.1. Questionnaires

Data was collected using two questionnaires: the Agentic Engagement Scale and the Self-Determination Motivation Scale. The Agentic Engagement Scale included 16 items derived from Guo's (2018) study, categorized into four areas: Studying Alone (items 1-4), Assistant Teaching (items 5-8), Cooperating with Teachers (items 9-12), and Learning with Classmates (items 13-16). These items were designed to capture various aspects of student engagement in oral English learning on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The Self-Determination Motivation Scale was based on Noel et al.'s [16] Learning Orientation Scale and was divided into four categories: External Regulation, Interjected Regulation, Identified Regulation, and Intrinsic Motivation. This scale also employed a Likert format from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), facilitating an understanding of students' motivational drivers for learning oral English.

3.3.2. Semi-structured interview

To complement questionnaire data with qualitative insights through interviews is

essential for obtaining a holistic view. Thus, ten students that were balanced by gender, were purposefully selected based on similar academic performance levels for further inquiry. Interview questions were crafted according to the categories established in the Agentic Engagement Scale allowing selected participants to elaborate on their experiences related to oral English learning comprehensively. Insights gained through these interviews enriched understanding around motivations, levels of engagement, and overall learning experiences beyond structured questionnaire responses.

3.4. Procedures

Stage One: The study rigorously collected data during the midpoint of the semester, targeting the dynamic interaction between learners and their peers, instructors, as well as the various instructional tasks and environmental factors shaping their learning experiences. Given the relative stability typically observed at this stage, the questionnaire emerged as the principal research tool, strategically deployed during this period. Administered via the Questionnaire Star platform in China, the questionnaire sought to gauge learners' levels of agentic engagement and self-determination motivation. To ensure the integrity of the data, participants were allotted a specific timeframe during class sessions to complete the questionnaire. Following stringent quality control measures, any incomplete or inconsistent responses were meticulously filtered out. Consequently, a robust dataset comprising 120 questionnaires was obtained, reflecting a commendable response rate of 96.5% and underscoring the reliability and validity of the collected data.

Stage Two: Following completion of quantitative data gathering via questionnaires, the focus shifted towards qualitative information acquisition through semi-structured interviews involving ten carefully chosen participants representing balanced gender proportions among those demonstrating comparable proficiency levels in oral English skills. Each participant engaged individually where researchers posed predetermined questions promoting consistency across responses while adhering strictly to ethical considerations ensuring informed consent was obtained regarding recording sessions throughout this investigative process.

Stage Three: The analysis of data began after collecting sufficient information through questionnaires and interviews. Specifically, SPSS 26 was used to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire regarding agentic engagement and self-determination motivation. Employing descriptive analysis first detailed variable levels while independent samples t-tests scrutinized potential disparities concerning agentic engagement linked with male versus female performance nuances during language proficiency tasks followed by correlation analysis revealing inter-variable relationships providing deeper insight into constructs involved. Following the transcription of interview recordings, qualitative findings were segmented in accordance with the research questions. The identified data was then thematically coded. Using established analytical procedures, including thematic coding and subsequent content analysis, the study enabled systematic and in-depth examination of the data. This process uncovered key patterns, which enhanced the contextual interpretation of this study.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Agentic engagement of male and female middle school oral English learners

4.1.1. Agentic engagement of male middle school oral English learners

The agentic engagement of male middle school students during their oral English learning typically ranged from moderate to moderately high, with values falling between 2 and 3.5.

Among the four dimensions assessed, “Assisting teachers” stood out with the highest engagement level, achieving an average score of 3.3333. This was closely followed by “Helping classmates”, which had an average score of 3.1667. In contrast, “Cooperating with teachers” showed the lowest level of engagement at an average score of 2.3333. Additionally, the dimension of “Studying alone” reflected a moderate level of participation, with an average score of 2.6667 and a standard deviation of 0.78942. These detailed findings, summarized in Table 4.1, provide insight into the diverse dynamics characterizing male middle school students’ agentic engagement in their oral English learning.

Table 4.1 Descriptive statistics of male middle school student’s agentic engagement in oral English learning

Variable	M	SD	N
Studying alone	2.6667	0.78942	60
Assisting teachers	3.3333	0.31851	60
Cooperating with teachers	2.3333	0.73228	60
Helping classmates	3.1667	0.43406	60

The above descriptive results demonstrate an overall positive inclination of male middle school learners toward agentic engagement in oral English learning. Their predominant preference for assisting teachers and supporting peers indicates that male students tend to gain a strong sense of agency through social and interactive learning behaviors rather than independent learning. The relatively low score in cooperating with teachers suggests that although males are willing to offer voluntary help to instructors, they remain passive in collaborative negotiation and joint knowledge construction with teachers. Their moderate level of individual self-study further reveals that male learners lack sufficient initiative in autonomous oral practice outside structured classroom guidance. Such behavioral patterns reflect that middle school boys’ agentic engagement is largely socially driven, relying on interpersonal interaction and role-taking in class, while independent learning awareness remains underdeveloped.

4.1.2. Agentic engagement of female middle school oral English learners

In the context of oral proficiency development, female middle school students generally demonstrated a moderate to low level of agentic engagement when compared to their male peers. Among the various dimensions assessed, the highest degree of agentic involvement is observed in “Helping classmates”, reflecting a strong inclination towards peer support and collaboration. This was closely followed by “Cooperating with teachers” (M=2.3333), which indicated an openness to collaborative learning with educators. The dimension labeled “Studying alone” (M=2.0883) revealed a moderate extent of independent engagement in their learning activities. Conversely, the dimension that showed the least amount of agentic engagement was “Assisting teachers” (M=2.0000), suggesting a lower tendency for direct assistance to instructors. These insights, presented in Table 4.2, offer a detailed perspective on the complex dynamics influencing female students’ agentic engagement in acquiring oral English skills.

Table 4.2 Descriptive statistics of female middle school student's agentic engagement in oral English learning

Variable	M	SD	N
Studying alone	2.0833	.67028	50
Assisting teachers	2.0000	.36116	50
Cooperating with teachers	2.3333	.48154	50
Helping classmates	2.4167	.24077	50

4.2. Differences in agentic engagement between male and female middle school students in oral English learning

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine potential differences in agentic engagement between male and female middle school students within the realm of oral English learning. The results indicated significant statistical differences ($p < 0.05$) in agentic engagement across genders, with specific variations noted across different aspects.

In the area of "studying alone", male students showed slightly higher levels of proactive engagement than female students, with mean scores of 2.6667 for males compared to 2.0833 for females. This gender difference proved to be statistically significant ($t = 2.760$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, male students exhibited considerably higher mean scores in the categories of "assisting teachers" and "helping classmates", recording values of 3.3333 and 3.1667 respectively, while females had lower mean scores of 2.0000 and 2.4167 respectively, highlighting marked gender differences in these areas ($p < 0.001$). On the other hand, regarding the dimension of "cooperating with teachers", no significant gender differences were found in agentic engagement ($p=1$), suggesting that there was little distinction between male and female students concerning this aspect. Overall, these findings highlight the complex gender-specific dynamics influencing agentic engagement among middle school students in oral English learning, emphasizing the necessity for targeted strategies to promote equitable participation and collaboration between genders.

Table 4.3 Independent-samples t-test on differences in agentic engagement between male and female middle school students in oral English learning

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	df	t	sig
Studying alone	Male	2.6667	.78942	120	2.760	.008
	Female	2.0833	.67028			
Assisting teachers	Male	3.3333	.31851	120	13.565	.000
	Female	2.0000	.36116			
Cooperating with teachers	Male	2.3333	.73228	120	.000	1.000
	Female	2.3333	.48154			
Helping classmates	Male	3.1667	.43406	120	7.042	.000
	Female	2.4167	.24077			

The independent sample t-test results further elaborate profound gender disparities in agentic engagement. First, the significant advantage of male learners in independent learning verifies that boys possess stronger autonomous learning awareness and less psychological inhibition in oral practice. The extremely prominent gender gaps in assisting teachers and peer support indicate that male students hold greater behavioral boldness, lower speaking anxiety, and higher initiative to participate in interactive classroom events. These differences can be explained by traditional gender socialization: males are culturally encouraged to express

themselves openly, take classroom roles, and interact with authority figures, whereas females tend to remain reserved and avoid overt performance.

Notably, the identical mean scores and non-significant difference in teacher cooperation reveal that both genders share consistent passive acceptance of instructional arrangements. Neither group takes proactive agency in collaborative curriculum construction, dialogue negotiation, or mutual learning with teachers. This common deficiency implies that middle school English classrooms remain largely teacher-centred, restricting student agency in relational interaction with instructors regardless of gender. Accordingly, pedagogical reform should address female learners' oral anxiety and reserved participation, while guiding male students to deepen autonomous learning, and promote equal interactive agency for both genders.

4.3. The relationship between agentic engagement and self-determination motivation

Table 4.4 provides comprehensive mean and standard deviation figures for the four distinct aspects of self-determination motivation among middle school students engaged in oral English learning. The data revealed subtle differences across these motivational areas. Specifically, the mean score for external regulation was relatively low at 2.3333, indicating a lesser impact of externally imposed factors on student motivation. Introjected regulation showed a slight increase with a mean value of 2.6667, but it remained modest compared to the other dimensions. In contrast, identified regulation and intrinsic motivation presented significantly higher mean scores of 3.3750 and 3.6667, respectively, emphasizing their strong influence on students' self-determined motivation. These results highlight the crucial roles that identified regulation and intrinsic motivation play in enhancing middle school students' agentic engagement in oral English learning.

As a result, these findings imply that middle school students tend to be more intrinsically motivated and aligned with self-identified goals and genuine interest in the learning process, rather than primarily influenced by external pressures or factors. This focus on intrinsic motivation underscores the significance of creating autonomous and self-directed learning environments to improve student engagement and proficiency in oral English.

Table 4.4 Descriptive statistics of self-determination motivation

Variables	Mean	SD	N
External regulation	2.3333	.37424	120
Introjected regulation	2.6667	.11835	120
Identified regulation	3.3750	.19174	120
Intrinsic motivation	3.6667	.27754	120

The findings presented in Table 4.5 indicate that at a significant level ($p < 0.01$), most variables showed positive correlations. Notably, there was a strong positive correlation between peer assistance and aiding teaching, with a correlation coefficient of 0.751, suggesting a substantial positive relationship between mutual student support and teaching assistance.

Conversely, several instances revealed negative correlations among variables as well; for instance, there existed a considerable negative correlation of -0.5 between external regulation and assisting teachers, implying that higher levels of external regulation corresponded to less demand for teaching support. Additionally, some variable pairs did not exhibit significant correlations; however, despite these exceptions, an overall close association was evident between the agentic engagement subscale and the self-determination motivation subscale. This

further reinforced the inherent link between autonomous engagement and self-determined motivation.

Table 4.5 Correlation analysis of agentic engagement and self-determination motivation in oral English learning

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	1							
2	.397**	1						
3	.397**	.361**	1					
4	.622**	.751**	.394**	1				
5	.433**	-.500**	-.491**	-.128	1			
6	.571**	-.198*	.097	.405**	.632**	1		
7	.670**	.366**	-.360**	.483**	.586**	.463**	1	
8	.730**	.219*	.538**	.099	.169	.107	.197**	1

1=Studying alone, 2=Assisting teachers, 3=Cooperating with teachers, 4=Helping classmates, 5=External regulation, 6=Introjected regulation, 7=Identified regulation, 8=Intrinsic motivation ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

From the perspective of self-determination theory, the motivational distribution shown in Table 4.4 is theoretically consistent with adolescent language learning characteristics. The dominance of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation demonstrates that students' oral English learning is mainly driven by internal interest, personal value recognition, and self-improvement demands, while external pressure and internalized obligation exert weak effects. This motivational structure directly supports the overall level of student agency, as high intrinsic motivation is the fundamental psychological precursor of agentic behaviors.

The correlation analysis in Table 4.5 further verifies the causal and interactive mechanism between motivation and agentic engagement. The strong positive correlation between peer help and teacher assistance indicates that socially oriented agentic behaviors are mutually reinforcing; learners who are active in peer interaction are also willing to engage in supportive behaviors toward teachers. The prominent negative correlation between external regulation and teacher assistance suggests that externally controlled motivation restricts proactive classroom agency. When students learn merely due to parental requirements, exam pressure, or school rules, they lose voluntary initiative to contribute to classroom activities.

Overall, the significant positive correlations across most dimensions confirm the theoretical proposition of self-determination theory: enhanced autonomous motivation effectively promotes diverse agentic engagement. Weak extrinsic motivation fails to sustain long-term active participation, whereas intrinsic interest and goal internalization continuously stimulate students to take charge of their oral learning. Therefore, cultivating self-determined motivation is an essential pathway to improve students' agentic engagement in oral English learning.

4.4. Factors affecting the agentic engagement of male and female middle school students in oral English learning

4.4.1. Internal factors

Personal interests were a significant factor affecting middle school students' engagement in English oral learning; they played a critical role in shaping motivation levels as well as participation rates. These interests encompassed aspirations and preferences regarding learning styles that deeply influenced attitudes toward oral language activities. Adapting

activities to cater to various preferences—such as group discussions or solo presentations—can enhance students' sense of agency while promoting deeper interaction with the language. Self-efficacy was another key internal factor influencing middle school students' agentic engagement within oral English learning contexts. Self-efficacy impacted students' agentic engagement in oral English learning by shaping their perceptions, motivations, and behaviors. When students possessed high levels of self-efficacy in oral language skills, they were more likely to actively engage in learning activities, persisted in the face of challenges, and exhibited greater confidence in their abilities.

Self-efficacy influenced students' perceptions of their own linguistic capabilities. High self-efficacy students believed they possessed the necessary skills to effectively communicate in English, leading to positive attitudes towards oral learning tasks and a willingness to participate actively in class discussions, presentations, or group activities.

Moreover, self-efficacy played a crucial role in motivating students to set challenging goals and strive for excellence in their oral language proficiency. Students with high self-efficacy were more likely to engage in self-directed learning efforts, such as practicing speaking outside of class or seeking opportunities to improve their language skills independently.

In addition, self-efficacy influenced students' behaviors and responses to setbacks or difficulties encountered during oral English learning. High self-efficacy students were more resilient in the face of challenges, viewing obstacles as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable barriers. They were more likely to persevere in their efforts, seek assistance when needed, and employ effective strategies to overcome difficulties in oral communication. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy exhibited avoidance behaviors, reluctance to participate in oral activities, and feelings of anxiety or self-doubt regarding their language abilities. Their lack of confidence hindered their willingness to take risks, express themselves openly, or engage actively in oral English learning opportunities.

Finally, learning disposition significantly impacted middle school students' agentic engagement during oral English learning by encompassing attitudes toward the process itself—including beliefs about its value—which shaped motivation levels along with overall willingness towards engaging communicatively using the target language. Interest and enjoyment were fostered by a positive learning disposition, with students finding intrinsic satisfaction and pleasure in engaging with the English language. They genuinely enjoyed communicating in English, valued the process of expressing their thoughts and ideas, and actively sought opportunities to enhance their proficiency through practice and participation.

Combined with previous statistical results on gender differences and motivational correlations, the internal influencing factors can well explain the observed variations in student agentic engagement. First, personal learning interest serves as the initial driving force for voluntary oral participation. Students with strong interest naturally initiate more interactive and independent behaviors, which directly differentiates their agency levels.

Self-efficacy is identified as the core internal mechanism underlying gender disparities in this study. The relatively higher oral self-efficacy of male students accounts for their greater initiative in assisting teachers, supporting peers and independent study. By contrast, female learners' lower self-perceived competence and persistent oral anxiety directly lead to their reserved agency and avoidance of overt classroom performance. As illustrated in the analysis, low self-efficacy triggers behavioral avoidance, which further weakens practice opportunities and forms a vicious cycle of insufficient engagement.

Meanwhile, positive learning disposition reinforces intrinsic motivation, which in turn sustains long-term agentic behaviors. Students who hold positive attitudes toward oral English learning tend to internalise learning goals and reduce external dependence. In summary, the three internal factors—personal interest, self-efficacy and learning disposition—interact collectively

to shape individual agency. To promote balanced gender engagement, internal psychological intervention should focus on improving female students' oral self-efficacy and alleviating language anxiety, while guiding male learners to establish more stable positive learning dispositions.

4.4.2. External factors

Firstly, the technological environment in which students were immersed impacted their engagement in oral English learning. The prevalence of digital communication tools, social media platforms, and multimedia resources shaped students' communication habits and preferences. Access to technology-rich environments provided opportunities for interactive language practice, digital collaboration, and real-world language experiences, enhancing students' engagement in oral English learning activities.

Secondly, teacher played a crucial role as an external factor influencing middle school students' agentic engagement in oral English learning. The teacher's teaching style and approach influenced students' engagement. Interactive and student-centered methods, such as discussions, debates, and group activities, encouraged active participation. Effective classroom management promotes agency engagement by establishing clear expectations, routines, and a respectful environment. Well-managed classrooms encourage students to participate in oral activities without hesitation. Feedback and encouragement provided by the teacher were vital. Constructive feedback and positive reinforcement built students' confidence and motivation to participate actively in English oral learning. Building personal connections and rapport with students fostered trust and positive relationships. Teachers who showed genuine interest in students' progress and individual needs encouraged open communication and increased engagement. Providing language support and differentiation strategies ensured equitable participation among all students. Scaffolding language, teaching communication strategies, and adapting materials to diverse needs promoted active engagement. Passionate teachers who demonstrated a love for English language and effective communication motivated students to engage actively in oral English learning.

External conditions complement internal psychological factors and jointly construct the ecological environment of student agentic engagement. Technological learning resources expand the space for oral practice beyond classroom limitations, providing low-pressure platforms for shy learners, especially female students, to conduct autonomous speaking practice and thereby improve agency. Diversified multimedia tools can effectively compensate for insufficient in-class oral opportunities and weaken anxiety caused by face-to-face expression.

Among all external variables, teacher-related factors are the most decisive. Traditional teacher-centred instruction restricts student initiative, whereas interactive, supportive teaching directly activates agentic behaviors. Teachers' positive feedback, emotional rapport and differentiated scaffolding effectively elevate learners' self-efficacy, which has been confirmed as a core internal driver of agency. In view of the non-significant gender difference in teacher cooperation revealed in the previous section 4.2, current classroom interaction still remains dominated by teacher transmission. Teachers seldom create equal collaborative space for both genders to participate.

Therefore, external pedagogical optimization should prioritize student-centred classroom reform, adequate positive feedback, and differentiated teaching for male and female learners. Integrating digital oral resources and constructing supportive classroom atmosphere can jointly stimulate student agency, narrow gender gaps in oral engagement, and promote balanced and sustainable development of middle school students' autonomous oral English learning.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on agentic engagement in oral English learning among middle school students, with a specific focus on gender differences, its relationship with self-determination motivation, and internal and external influencing factors. The major findings can be summarized as follows. First, male students showed significantly higher agentic engagement than female students, especially in assisting teachers, helping classmates, and studying alone. Both genders were passive in cooperating with teachers, and no significant gender difference was detected in this dimension. Second, students' motivation was dominated by intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, which were positively correlated with agentic engagement, while external regulation was negatively related to proactive learning behaviors. Third, agentic engagement was affected by internal factors including personal interest, self-efficacy, and learning disposition, as well as external factors including technological environment and teacher-related variables such as teaching style, feedback, and classroom support.

These findings carry important implications for English teaching and educational practice. Teachers should recognize the significant gender gaps in agentic engagement and implement gender-responsive instruction to reduce female students' oral anxiety, improve their self-efficacy, and encourage more active participation. Meanwhile, more opportunities for independent and collaborative learning should be provided to strengthen students' sense of autonomy and initiative. In addition, teachers should create a supportive, inclusive, and low-pressure classroom atmosphere, use positive feedback and student-centered approaches such as project-based learning and cooperative activities to enhance intrinsic motivation. The integration of digital tools and authentic oral tasks can also expand practice opportunities and further promote agentic engagement in oral English learning.

This study enriches empirical research on agentic engagement in second language acquisition and provides a clear framework for understanding gender differences and motivational mechanisms in oral English learning. Nevertheless, several limitations exist and point to directions for future research. Future studies may expand the sample size and include students from different regions or grade levels to improve generalizability. Longitudinal designs can be adopted to explore the developmental changes of agentic engagement over time. In addition, qualitative methods such as interviews and classroom observations can be combined to further investigate the dynamic process and deeper psychological mechanisms of students' agentic engagement.

References

- [1] Yan, J, Rui Mei S. Gender differences in freshman's English autonomous learning activities [C]. Proceedings of 2019 5th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2019)(Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research , VOL.319). Atlantis Press, 2019:4.
- [2] Deci EL, & Ryan RM. Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior [M]. New York: Plenum. 1985.
- [3] Deci EL, & Ryan RM. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior [J]. Psychological Inquiry, 2000, 11(4), 227-268.
- [4] Jiang AL, & Zhang LJ. University teachers' teaching style and their students' agentic engagement in EFL learning in China: A self-determination theory and achievement goal theory integrated perspective[J]. Frontiers in Psychology, 2021, 12, 704269.

- [5] Wang, J., Kaufman, T., Mastrotheodoros, S. et al. The longitudinal associations between parental autonomy support, autonomy and peer resistance. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2024, 53, 1015–1027.
- [6] Reeve, J., & Shin, S. H. How teachers can support students' agentic engagement [J]. *Theory into Practice*, 2020, 59, 150-161.
- [7] Tian, X. A study on internal and external motivation of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs toward English learning. *English Square*, 2021, (17), 65–68.
- [8] Bandura A. Toward a psychology of human agency: pathways and reflections [J]. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 2018, 13(2):130–136.
- [9] Reeve, J., & Tseng, M. Agency as a Fourth Aspect of Student Engagement During Learning Activities[J]. *Contemp. Educational Psychology*, 2011, 36,257-267.
- [10] Reeve, J. When Students Show Some Initiative: Two Experiments on the Benefits of Great Agentic Engagement[J]. *Learning and Instruction*, 2022, 80, 101564.
- [11] Albaqawi HM, Nageeb SM. The relationship between psychological well-being, academic engagement, and self-regulated learning among student nurses [J]. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*. 2022, 36(1-3):83–90.
- [12] Shi, XM. *A study of college English learners' speaking learning agency from an ecological perspective* (Doctoral dissertation). Beijing Foreign Studies University. 2024.
- [13] Zhang, Q. Gender difference in English learning[C]. *The 2nd International Conference on Social and Society*. 2012.
- [14] Zhao, XY. A study on gender differences in the use of stance markers in English learners' oral speech. *English on Campus*, 2020, (04), 240.
- [15] Li, WF. An empirical study on language learning and gender differences among English majors. *Language and Culture Research*, 2023, 30(05), 68–71.
- [16] Noels, K. A., L. G. Pelletier, R. Clément, and R. J. Vallerand. "Why are You Learning a Second Language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination Theory." *Language Learning*, 2000, 50 (1): 57–85.