

Structured Autonomy in a Chinese Innovative EFL Classroom: Supporting Low-Motivation Learner Engagement

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Abstract: Innovative, student-centred EFL classrooms are often expected to increase learner autonomy and engagement. However, low-motivation learners may struggle when autonomy is offered without sufficient structure. This paper presents a qualitative case study of Jayden, a low-motivation student in a Chinese secondary EFL classroom informed by the 271 model. Drawing on classroom observation, teacher interview, student dialogue, and reflective journals, the study examines how structured autonomy shaped his participation. Informed primarily by Self-Determination Theory, with ATRiUM used as a sensitising framework, the analysis shows that clear task steps, achievable goals, group-leader mediation, peer support, affirming feedback, and reflective scaffolding gradually supported Jayden's engagement and self-management. Yet open tasks, uneven group participation, limited reflection time, and exam-oriented classroom routines still constrained deeper engagement. The study argues that learner autonomy in innovative EFL classrooms should be structured through clear pathways, supportive relationships, and formative feedback.

Keywords: Structured Autonomy; Innovative EFL Classroom; Low-Motivation Learners; Learner Engagement; Scaffolding; Peer Support

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1. Introduction

Student-centered classrooms are increasingly promoted as a way of moving learners from passive reception of knowledge toward more active participation, driven by greater autonomy and collaboration^[1,2]. Within the context of Chinese basic education, the “271” classroom model represents one localized example of this broader shift toward student-centered pedagogy. Published accounts typically describe the model as devoting around 20% of class time to teacher explanation and guidance, 70% to students' independent learning, collaborative inquiry, and discussion, and the remaining 10% to consolidation, assessment, or internalizing what has been learned^[3,4].

However, providing greater autonomy does not necessarily lead to higher levels of classroom engagement for all students, particularly those with relatively low learning motivation^[5,6]. Student engagement has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that encompasses not only observable behaviors, such as task completion and participation in classroom activities, but also affective involvement and cognitive investment in learning^[1]. Sustained engagement is also shaped by the degree of classroom structure, the feedback provided by teachers, and the availability of supportive teacher–student relationships^[5,2]. Accordingly, when open-ended tasks are not accompanied by clear procedural guidance, well-

defined roles, and timely feedback, students with lower levels of motivation may struggle to translate increased autonomy into active engagement and may instead display delayed task initiation, avoidance, peripheral participation, or superficial engagement^[7,5].

Beyond these structural considerations, the availability of opportunities for participation cannot be fully understood solely from the formal features of a classroom model or from teachers' pedagogical intentions, because such opportunities may be experienced and taken up differently by individual learners^[8,9]. From student-voice and affordance perspectives, such opportunities are perceived and taken up differently by individual learners^[8,9]. Accordingly, research on students with lower levels of motivation in innovative classroom settings needs to examine both observable changes in their classroom engagement and their own perceptions of the affordances and constraints of the learning environment^[1,10].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Students with Lower Levels of Motivation and Classroom Engagement

In this study, "low motivation" is used as a contextual analytical descriptor grounded in persistent patterns of classroom participation, teacher judgments, and interviews with Jayden, rather than as a scale-based psychological classification. Fredricks et al.^[1] conceptualized student engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, and pointed out that low engagement does not always look like overt resistance, students may simply appear quiet while remaining behaviorally passive or minimally involved. Skinner and Belmont^[5] further showed that the structure teachers provide is closely tied to the quality of students' engagement: when expectations and guidance are clear, students tend to sustain their participation, whereas insufficient structure can undermine it. This study accordingly focuses on how Jayden's classroom participation changed in relation to structured pedagogical support.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, holds that motivation is closely tied to the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness^[11,6]. Autonomy is the experience of volition and agency in one's own learning. Competence is feeling capable of engaging with and completing learning tasks. Relatedness is feeling supported, accepted, and connected to others in a learning community.

SDT offers a lens for interpreting both Jayden's observable engagement and his subjective experience of learning. How manageable a task feels, how capable he feels, and how much relational support he receives may all shape his engagement.

2.3 Structured Autonomy and Scaffolding in Innovative Classrooms

Autonomy support and structure are conceptually distinct but can complement each other: the former concerns learners' sense of volition and agency, the latter the clarity of expectations, guidance, procedures, and feedback. How this complementarity plays out for students with persistently low classroom participation in student-centered EFL settings, however, remains poorly understood. Scaffolding perspectives suggest that learners often need temporary support from teachers or more capable peers to enter and sustain engagement with tasks they cannot yet manage on their own^[12,13]. Kirschner et al.^[7] went further, cautioning that minimally guided learning environments may work poorly for learners who lack the prior knowledge or resources to regulate complex learning processes themselves.

Building on these perspectives, this study uses structured autonomy as an analytical concept referring to the provision of meaningful space for learner autonomy alongside clear instructional structure and supportive relationships that scaffold participation, making autonomous engagement more accessible, sustainable, and reflective.

Structured autonomy in this sense links the study's examination of observable participation to learners' own perceptions of autonomy-oriented classroom practices.

2.4 The ATRiUM Framework as a Sensitizing Tool

ATRiUM^[14] was used here as a supplementary sensitizing framework rather than a primary explanatory model of engagement. Drawing on the New Zealand Key Competencies, it points to five dimensions — Active learning, Thinking, Relating to others, Using language, symbol systems and ICT, and Managing self. These dimensions helped sensitize the analysis to different manifestations of Jayden's classroom participation, while SDT and structured autonomy remained the principal interpretive lenses.

2.5 Student Voice: Perceived Affordances and Constraints in Innovative Classrooms

Teachers' pedagogical intentions do not always match what students actually perceive as learning opportunities. Cook-Sather^[8] argued that student voice offers insight into how students experience classroom life, interpret tasks, and understand their own position within it.

An affordance perspective adds that learning opportunities are not fixed by instructional design alone but are perceived and realized through learners' interactions with their environment^[9]. Ushioda^[10] similarly argued that how learners interpret and respond to their learning environment is closely bound up with their motivation, sense of self, and situated context. These perspectives underpin RQ2's focus on how Jayden perceived the affordances and constraints of autonomy-oriented classroom practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

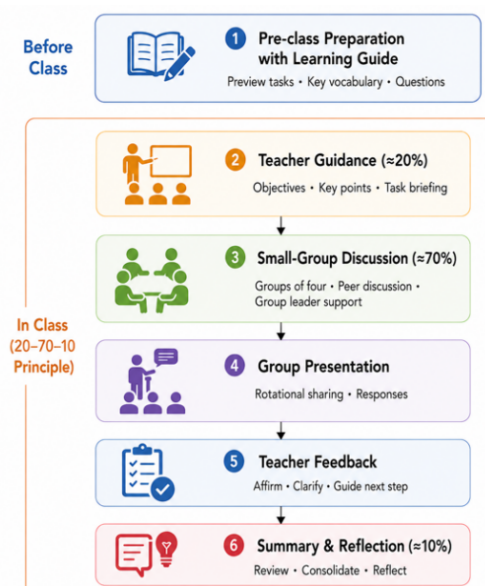
This study used a qualitative single-case design to examine how a student with relatively low learning motivation experienced and responded to structured pedagogical support in a junior secondary English classroom implementing the 271 model in China. A case-study design allows in-depth investigation of complex educational phenomena in their real context^[15,16]. Jayden was the bounded case, and the 271 English classroom he was part of formed the context through which his engagement is interpreted here.

Structured autonomy served as the central analytical concept linking the two research questions. The researcher occupied a dual role as classroom observer and learning support tutor, which included reading students' reflective journals and giving written feedback on them. Journal-based feedback exchanges are therefore treated as interactionally generated data rather than independent observational evidence; the methodological and ethical implications of this dual role are discussed further in Section 3.6.

3.2 Research Context

The study took place in a junior secondary English classroom in China. To protect the identities of the school, teacher, and students, the school's name is withheld and only information relevant to the research questions is reported. Jayden was enrolled in a Grade 8 English class of 43 students, taught five times a week by an English teacher with 20 years of experience. The classroom implemented the 271 model, allocating a substantial share of lesson time to student-led and collaborative learning, independent study, group work, classroom presentation, and teacher-guided consolidation and assessment. Figure 1 summarizes how the 271 model broadly organizes classroom activity around teacher guidance, independent and collaborative learning, student presentation, and consolidation.

Figure 1. The Classroom Process of the 271 Model



In the focal classroom, these proportions were not applied rigidly. The teacher adjusted the sequence to fit lesson content and progress, typically moving from preparatory or independent work toward collaborative activities and classroom presentation. Classroom tasks centered mainly on English vocabulary, target sentence patterns, reading comprehension, and discourse-level organization and logic.

Collaborative group work was a central organizational feature of the 271 model as implemented in this classroom. Students generally worked in groups of four, each with a designated group leader responsible for organizing discussion, prompting members to participate, monitoring task completion, and providing peer support.

Classroom presentations were organized largely through group rotation rather than voluntary participation. Groups presented discussion outcomes or responses to reading-comprehension tasks, followed by teacher clarification and feedback. Despite this student-centered organization, activities remained strongly curriculum- and assessment-oriented, particularly around vocabulary, reading comprehension, comparing responses, and discourse analysis.

3.3 Participant

The focal student is referred to by the pseudonym Jayden, a junior secondary English learner identified as displaying relatively low learning motivation and classroom participation. This did not reflect limited learning ability; rather, it referred to a recurring pattern of difficulty with self-management and sustained participation, particularly during open-ended tasks and collaborative activities.

Classroom observations indicated that Jayden often showed delayed task initiation, fluctuating attention, limited spontaneous contribution to group discussion, reluctance to engage with open-ended tasks, reliance on peer prompting, and low confidence during classroom presentation. Together, these patterns suggest that Jayden did not consistently translate the participation opportunities available in this student-centered classroom into active engagement.

Jayden was purposively selected as an information-rich case illustrating the tension between opportunities for autonomy and inconsistent classroom participation.

3.4 Data Collection

Data came from classroom observations, teacher interviews, interviews with Jayden, and reflective journals. Together, these complementary sources allowed the study to examine both observable participation and participants' own interpretations across the seven-week study period^[17] (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Data Collection Overview

Data Source	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
Classroom Observation	Observation 1	—	Observation 1	—	—	—	Observation 1
Teacher Interview	Interview 1	—	—	Interview 1	—	—	Interview 1
Jayden Interview	Interview 1	—	Interview 1	—	Interview 1	—	Interview 1
Reflective Journal	Journal 1	Journal 2	Journal 3	Journal 4	Journal 5	Journal 6	Journal 7

3.4.1 Classroom Observation

Three English lessons of approximately 45 minutes each were observed. These observations documented observable aspects of Jayden's participation in the natural classroom setting: whether he initiated tasks promptly, sustained engagement during independent learning, contributed to group discussion and responded to peers, took on specific responsibilities in preparing for presentations, and continued working when the teacher or peers offered support.

Field notes focused on task initiation, sustained participation, group interaction, help-seeking, and classroom presentation.

3.4.2 Teacher Interviews

Three semi-structured interviews of approximately 40 minutes each were conducted with the English teacher and audio-recorded. They explored the teacher's interpretations of Jayden's participation and how task structure, group support, presentation, and feedback were organized. Interviewing at multiple points also made it possible to ask follow-up questions about patterns noticed during observation and to probe the teacher's interpretations of Jayden's varying classroom behavior.

3.4.3 Interviews with Jayden

Four semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes each were conducted with Jayden across the seven-week period and audio-recorded. They explored his experience of independent learning, peer collaboration, presentation, feedback, and reflection, paying particular attention to practices he found supportive or difficult to navigate.

3.4.4 Reflective Journals

Jayden completed seven weekly reflective journal entries documenting his learning experiences, difficulties, self-perceptions, and possible strategies for adjustment. Because the researcher gave written feedback on these journals, they are treated as interactionally generated data; the implications of this dual role are discussed in Section 3.6.

3.4.5 Language and Translation

Teacher and student interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Quotations were translated into English by the researcher, prioritizing contextual meaning over word-for-word equivalence, and checked against the original Chinese data.

3.5 Data Analysis

An inductive–deductive thematic analysis was conducted^[18]. Initial coding was data-driven, with SDT, ATRiUM, and affordance concepts introduced afterward as interpretive rather than predetermined coding frameworks.

The analysis began with data familiarization: the researcher repeatedly read the classroom observation notes, the teacher- and student-interview transcripts, and the seven reflective journal entries, recording preliminary analytic notes on Jayden's participation and learning experiences. Initial coding then focused on recurring phenomena such as task initiation, sustained participation, peer prompting, help-seeking, responses to feedback, participation in presentations, difficulty navigating tasks, and changes in reflection. These codes were grouped into broader candidate themes and refined iteratively through constant comparison across data sources.

For RQ1, observations across the study period were compared for changes in task initiation, participation, interaction, help-seeking, and presentation, with teacher interviews and journals used for contextualization. SDT was then used to interpret how these inductively developed patterns related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, rather than as a predetermined coding scheme. ATRiUM served as a supplementary sensitizing lens for checking whether the themes captured varied manifestations of classroom participation and learning processes.

For RQ2, Jayden's interviews and journals were inductively coded for perceived learning opportunities and constraints, after which van Lier's^[9] affordance perspective was applied interpretively.

Themes were compared across data sources, and discrepancies between teacher intentions, observed behavior, and Jayden's perceptions were retained as analytically meaningful rather than reconciled away.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participant and school identities were protected through pseudonyms, anonymization, and the omission or generalization of potentially identifying information, in line with BERA^[19]. School permission, teacher and guardian consent, and Jayden's assent were obtained. Participants were told that taking part was voluntary and would not affect Jayden's academic evaluation. Particular attention was given to the power asymmetry involved in Jayden's status as a minor student.

The researcher's concurrent role as learning support tutor may have shaped Jayden's journal entries and interview responses. Reflective journals are therefore treated as interactionally generated rather than independent records, and claims based on researcher-involved data are interpreted cautiously.

4. Findings

The findings are organized around RQ1, on changes in Jayden's classroom participation, and RQ2, on his perceived affordances and constraints of autonomy-oriented classroom practices.

RQ1: Student Responses to Structured Pedagogical Support

4.1 Clear Task Steps and Achievable Goals Facilitated Task Engagement

The first recurring pattern was that Jayden entered learning activities more readily once task expectations were explicit and learning goals were broken into concrete, manageable steps. Teacher-interview data indicated that during independent learning and open-ended tasks, Jayden was capable of participating but was more likely to delay starting, get distracted, or

wait passively when expectations were broad or the actionable steps unclear.

Rather than simply telling Jayden to be more proactive, the teacher made expected actions explicit by breaking tasks into manageable stages.

“This was quite effective because it gave him a specific action to take at each stage. He could proceed step by step and know what he was expected to do at each point. Gradually, he could begin to develop his own learning rhythm.”

(Teacher, Interview 2)

The teacher also initially assigned tasks Jayden could complete without much strain; finishing these smaller tasks was often followed by continued participation.

4.2 Peer Support and Group-Leader Mediation Facilitated Participation

A second recurring pattern was that group work seemed to benefit Jayden not simply because it was collaborative, but because of whether the group leader actively organized, prompted, and supported his participation.

The group leader frequently prompted Jayden when his attention drifted, when he had not yet started a task, or when he ran into difficulty. When the group leader prompted him to work through the steps or reasoning himself, rather than simply supplying an answer, he was more likely to re-enter the discussion and resume the task.

Group work, however, did not always provide the same level of support. According to the teacher, when the group leader focused mainly on their own work or interacted mostly with the more active group members, Jayden could stay peripheral to the activity. As the teacher put it, “If the atmosphere in the group is good, he can join in. But if the group leader does not take the lead, he may end up disengaged and drift outside the lesson” (Teacher, Interview 2).

4.3 Affirming Feedback Supported Confidence and Provided Direction

A third pattern concerned affirming but actionable feedback. The teacher reported acknowledging what Jayden had already accomplished before pointing out areas for improvement, especially when his confidence was low.

“If you give him affirming feedback first and then ask him to revise and improve, he will be much more motivated. But if you immediately tell him what he needs to do differently, he may interpret that as a rejection of what he has already done.”

(Teacher, Interview 3)

Jayden’s own account illustrated how specific feedback could turn a previously vague learning difficulty into something identifiable. Reflecting on feedback about an incomplete “logic chain,” he explained that “my logic chain wasn’t complete ... and suddenly I understood why I couldn’t get the marks. I thought I had covered most of the points, but the key logical words were not right” (Jayden, Interview 2).

The feedback turned a vague sense of being wrong into a specific sense of what needed revising. Researcher feedback in the reflective journals showed a similar affirmation-before-guidance pattern, though these exchanges are treated as interactionally generated rather than independent evidence of feedback effects.

4.4 Structured Presentation Facilitated Gradual Participation

Structured presentation created oral participation opportunities for Jayden, and these became more accessible once accompanied by preparation and clear organization. Because presentations followed a group rotation system rather than relying entirely on volunteers, Jayden took part whenever his group was scheduled to present.

The teacher also stressed how much early presentation experiences mattered, noting that “if he feels he’s messed up the first few times, it’s not just shyness anymore---he may start to feel fear, dread, even resistance toward presenting” (Teacher, Interview 2).

Presentations were therefore typically preceded by some preparation and structure — clarifying content and procedures or initially assigning relatively manageable presentation duties before expectations increased gradually.

Jayden’s interviews suggested his experience of presenting changed across repeated opportunities. He reported feeling less nervous and less rushed than in earlier presentations and becoming gradually better at organizing and delivering his ideas. This change, by his account, did not follow from a single presentation but built up incrementally through repeated cycles of preparation, presentation, and feedback.

4.5 Reflective Journals Indicated a Longitudinal Shift in Learning Awareness

Across the seven weeks, Jayden's reflective journals showed a gradual shift toward more specific understandings of his own learning.

In Week 1, his reflection consisted mostly of broad descriptions of feeling — he wrote of needing to “understand what I am feeling inside,” without identifying a specific course of action. By Week 3, he had begun reflecting more explicitly on his learning rhythm and the role of consistent support.

By Week 6, his reflection had become more specific still. After performing poorly on a reading-comprehension quiz, Jayden noted that although he had spent considerable time memorizing vocabulary, he had paid relatively little attention to the logical relationships between sentences and the organization of the text — and linked this imbalance to his difficulty with the more demanding comprehension questions. From this, he proposed combining vocabulary learning with greater attention to discourse-level logic and building this adjustment into his preparation and group discussions.

By Week 7, his reflection extended to how he evaluated himself. He wrote that “subjective judgment can easily build a person up---and just as easily tear them down” (Jayden, Reflective Journal, Week 7), going on to reflect on his tendency to swing between overconfidence and self-doubt, and on the need for a more balanced way of judging his own learning.

Across the seven entries, then, his reflections moved from general emotional description toward more specific identification of learning problems, their possible causes, and adjustments he might make.

RQ2: Student-Perceived Affordances and Constraints

4.6 Affordances: Peer Interaction as a Lower-Pressure Resource for Help-Seeking and Thinking

One of the clearest affordances Jayden associated with group work was that asking peers for help felt less pressuring than asking the teacher directly.

He explained that when a question felt relatively simple, he sometimes hesitated to approach the teacher, worried it might seem too basic or that the teacher was already busy:

“A lot of the time, when it's a really simple question, you worry that the teacher might tell you off for asking. But during group work, you can just ask a classmate to explain it, which feels much less pressuring than asking the teacher.”

(Jayden, Interview 1)

Jayden also valued group discussion because it gave him more time to think. As he put it, “Group discussion gives you continuous time to think things through and bounce ideas off each other” (Jayden, Interview 1). Group discussion gave him time to work through a problem before the teacher's explanation followed, helping him pinpoint where his own understanding had broken down.

4.7 Constraints: Autonomy-Oriented Tasks Were Difficult to Navigate Without Clear Structure

Jayden did not find all autonomy-oriented opportunities equally accessible, particularly when open-ended tasks lacked a clear entry point or when time for consolidation was short.

4.7.1 Open-Ended Tasks Could Create Uncertainty

Not knowing where to begin was, for Jayden, one of the most immediate difficulties in some open-ended tasks: “A lot of the time, when you're given a task, you simply don't know how to complete it or where to start” (Jayden, Interview 2).

This was especially true with unfamiliar content, where he first needed to identify a basic framework before he could engage with the task or group discussion. The teacher likewise noted that independent-learning periods could turn into waiting or distraction when clear goals and prompts were absent. Knowing how and where to begin, for Jayden, appeared to be an important condition for taking up opportunities for independent learning at all.

4.7.2 Limited Reflection Time and Exam-Oriented Tasks Constrained Deeper Learning

Jayden also felt that English lessons left relatively little time for consolidation and reflection.

As noted earlier, classroom activities remained strongly oriented toward vocabulary, reading comprehension, and answer-focused presentation. He noted that after presentations and teacher feedback, the time left for students to consolidate and reflect on what they had learned was sometimes brief: “The time left for self-summary is very short. I can't really pull everything together, and there isn't much time after class either, so it doesn't feel particularly efficient” (Jayden, Interview 3).

His Week 6 journal similarly pointed to a felt need for more time to organize sentence- and discourse-level relationships,

though the data do not establish a causal link to limited consolidation time as such. For Jayden, insufficient consolidation time could leave the learning process feeling unfinished even after preparation, discussion, and presentation.

5. Discussion

5.1 RQ1: Structured Pedagogical Support and Changes in Jayden's Classroom Participation

Overall, Jayden's participation became more sustained when autonomy-oriented opportunities came with accessible task structure, relational mediation, and actionable feedback.

From an SDT perspective, these patterns map onto autonomy, competence, and relatedness^[11,6]. Clear but non-controlling task pathways seemed to make learner agency more accessible; incremental goals and actionable feedback supported a sense of competence; and peer and group-leader mediation offered the relational support needed to enter collaborative activity. ATRIUM further sensitized the analysis to changes in active participation, relational engagement, thinking, and self-management, though it did not function as a separate explanatory account.

Jayden's case also suggests that engagement should not be judged only by overt behaviors like volunteering to speak, shifts in task initiation, help-seeking, and self-regulation can be meaningful, if less visible, forms of engagement^[1,5].

5.2 RQ2: Jayden's Perceived Affordances and Constraints in the Innovative Classroom

Jayden's experience of the 271 classroom was ambivalent: autonomy-oriented practices could open usable pathways into participation, yet became hard to navigate once structure, mediation, or reflection time ran short. This fits an ecological affordance perspective^[9], in which learning opportunities are not fixed by pedagogical design alone but emerge relationally, through learners' interaction with particular features of the environment.

Group discussion worked as an affordance for Jayden precisely because he experienced it as both a lower-pressure space for seeking help and a temporal buffer for processing problems at his own pace.

Conversely, insufficient procedural guidance or relational mediation could turn nominal opportunities for autonomy into uncertainty or peripheral participation, while assessment-oriented routines constrained opportunities for more extended expression.

This underlines why student voice matters for judging whether intended classroom opportunities are actually usable by learners^[8].

5.3 Structured Autonomy as an Integrative Explanation

Taken together, RQ1 and RQ2 suggest that autonomy-oriented opportunities became more usable for Jayden once accompanied by clear pedagogical structure — when that structure was present, opportunities for autonomy were more readily translated into participation. Autonomy did not require him to manage learning entirely on his own; rather, his agency was preserved while his participation was scaffolded through pedagogical and relational support.

The study therefore does not offer a blanket endorsement or rejection of innovative classroom models such as the 271 approach. The model created opportunities for independent learning, collaborative discussion, and classroom presentation, but whether these opportunities became meaningful for Jayden depended on how they were structured, mediated, supported through feedback and relationships, and paired with time for consolidation and reflection. Structured autonomy offers a useful integrative lens for reading both the observable participation changes identified under RQ1 and the learner-perceived affordances and constraints identified under RQ2.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

First, open-ended tasks should come with clear entry points and attainable intermediate goals, particularly for students who find it hard to start complex tasks. Second, collaborative learning should be deliberately structured through explicit roles, guidance for group leaders, and attention to whether less engaged students are actually joining the discussion. Third, feedback should combine acknowledgment of what has already been achieved with specific, actionable direction for improvement, especially where a learner's confidence is fragile. Finally, presentation and reflection need adequate preparation and time: presentation should be predictable and progressively more challenging, while reflection should give learners room to consolidate experience and identify adjustments they might make.

6. Conclusion

This single-case study examined how structured pedagogical support related to Jayden's participation and experiences in a 271 English classroom. Greater autonomy did not automatically translate into participation; participation became more accessible once autonomy-oriented opportunities were paired with pedagogical structure and relational support. The case also suggests that meaningful shifts in engagement can take less overt forms, in task initiation, help-seeking, and self-regulation.

A central conclusion is that autonomy and structure need not pull in opposite directions. Structured autonomy shows how learner agency can become more accessible when supported by clear, relationally supportive, navigable conditions for participation. Given the single-case design, these findings are contextually situated rather than generalizable across learners or 271 classrooms. Future research could examine how different forms of task structure, peer mediation, feedback, and reflection relate to longer-term engagement across a wider range of learners and contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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