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## UNDERSTANDING STUDENT AGENCY IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: THE ROLES OF MOTIVATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY

### Abstract

A growing body of research highlights the importance of developing student agency for achieving success in foreign language learning (FLL). This study investigates how foreign language anxiety, self-efficacy, and task value relate to three aspects of student agency: student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and agency for learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Given the study's focus on the interactional and collaborative aspects of student agency and acknowledging that class size can have an effect on classroom dynamics and student behaviour, particularly in terms of social interaction, students attending smaller ESP classes were selected for the study. Data were collected from 82 first-year, non-English major undergraduates from Croatia. Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses were employed. The results revealed that the anxiety-related variables did not significantly predict student agency. In contrast, self-efficacy emerged as a significant positive predictor of both student-student collaboration and ESP agency, while task value significantly predicted ESP agency. Furthermore, both self-efficacy and task value were positively correlated with all three components of student agency. These findings highlight the critical role of self-efficacy and task value in fostering student agency, whereas the effects of anxiety were less pronounced. The study contributes to a better understanding of student agency in university-level ESP learning, with particular emphasis on its motivational and affective determinants.

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### Key words

student agency, ESP learning, self-efficacy, task value, foreign language anxiety.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of students taking an active role in the process of foreign language learning (FLL) has been widely recognised as essential to realising their potential and achieving success (Dörnyei, 2009; Mercer, 2011; van Lier, 2008). Educational research consistently shows that various aspects of student engagement and self-regulation play a crucial role in improving learning quality, academic performance, and the overall academic experience (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Reeve, 2013). The concept of human agency has attracted significant scholarly interest across disciplines, resulting in a range of definitions that reflect its multifaceted nature. Nevertheless, agency is commonly understood as a complex and dynamic construct that refers to the capacity that enables individuals to act intentionally, make choices, and shape their lives and environments in pursuit of personal or professional goals. In educational domains, agency in learning refers to students taking ownership of their learning and engaging as active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Also, agency is closely linked to student motivation, autonomy, self-regulation and engagement. In the field of foreign language education, growing attention has been given to student agency, which is viewed as students' willingness and capacity to contribute to their learning through intentional actions while continuously interacting with the environment, as discussed by Mercer (2011, 2012). Van Lier (2008) emphasises that agency stems from the principle that learning is driven more by the learner's initiative and active involvement than by information delivered by teachers or textbooks. According to Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021), it is important to acknowledge that agency develops through both internal and external processes and is expressed through students' volitional, proactive, and purposeful investment in learning, which plays a crucial role in mastering a foreign language.

Previous research has emphasised that promoting agentic functioning significantly contributes to the effectiveness of FLL. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching increasingly emphasises broader communicative skills for real-world use, focusing on discourse and its connection to social practices and disciplinary knowledge, which requires students to adopt new roles and engage with knowledge in new ways (Hyland, 2022). Developing foreign language proficiency requires students to engage in active rather than passive interactions and collaborations with teachers and peers. When students speak spontaneously and initiate language use, whether by contributing to a conversation, asking questions, clarifying points, or responding and collaborating with others, students make decisions about what to say and how to say it, thereby expressing their autonomy, identity, and voice, all of which reflect agency. In contrast, when students refrain from engaging in such interactions in the language classroom, they miss valuable opportunities to experience and develop agency and improve language proficiency, which often poses a challenge for educators. Agentic individuals are described as active contributors to their learning rather than mere recipients of

information, as they intentionally shape their educational and life circumstances (Bandura, 2006). As such, agents are goal-oriented, act on their own behalf, and engage in dynamic exchanges with their environment. Building on the perspectives that stress the importance of intentional goal-directed learning behaviour in agency (Ryan & Mercer, 2011), in this study, student agency is conceptualised as behavioural. Specifically, it refers to students' proactive efforts to contribute to their language learning through meaningful interactions and cooperation with both teachers and peers. Given the importance of the interactional aspects of agency in FLL, three components were used to form the construct of student agency: student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and agency for learning ESP.

Prior research has shown that students' cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes can either support or hinder their agency (Bandura, 1997, 2001, 2006; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Mercer, 2011; Ryan & Mercer, 2011). Accordingly, this study seeks to examine how students' agency in the ESP classroom varies in relation to their levels of self-efficacy, task value, and foreign language anxiety. Due to the limited research on student agency in ESP and the scarcity of tools for assessing it, this paper proposes a framework for investigating student agency in ESP contexts, with a focus on its motivational and affective determinants.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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An increasing body of literature recognises the concept of student agency as a key component of student-centred learning and teaching (Klemenčič et al., 2020; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). Within the broader framework of human agency, this paper highlights the importance of examining student agency in the context of learning ESP. In ESP settings, where language learning is closely aligned with learners' academic disciplines, agency plays a particularly significant role as students are expected to engage actively with specialised content and apply language skills in professionally relevant contexts. However, despite its relevance, research on student agency within ESP remains scarce, with much of the existing literature focusing on general FLL contexts. In educational contexts, agency is commonly understood as the capacity and willingness of individuals to take control of their learning through intentional actions and interactions with their environment (Bandura, 2001; Brown, 2014; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Mercer, 2011). What distinguishes student agency from other forms of student engagement is its emphasis on self-initiated, voluntary actions that students take to contribute meaningfully to their learning experience. When organising a language course, a key consideration is how to encourage student participation and language use and prepare them to use the language successfully in various life and work-related situations. According to van Lier (2004), developing learner agency and promoting learner voice in the classroom are crucial preconditions for creating productive and effective FLL.

In the classroom, student agency is most evident when students take the initiative to participate in classroom interactions, seek clarification and feedback, express their opinions, needs and preferences, and thereby shape their own learning experience (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Reeve, 2013). Larsen-Freeman et al. (2021) point out that fostering agency shifts the focus from seeing learners as isolated individuals to recognising their social interconnectedness, which develops through classroom interactions and relationships. Consequently, the critical role that social and emotional experiences play in the learning process is acknowledged.

Agency is widely recognised as an inherent potential that each individual possesses. However, the extent to which students enact their agency in learning may depend on several personal factors, such as self-beliefs, the perceived value of learning, and goal commitment, as well as environmental factors, including the degree to which the environment encourages and supports agency (Bandura, 2001; Namgung et al., 2020). Thus, student agency is formed in the dynamic interplay of personal and contextual determinants. In a classroom, various factors can either facilitate or hinder students' self-initiated actions and interactions, which are acknowledged as essential for effective language learning (Brown, 2000; Mercer, 2012). As Mercer (2011) points out, the multi-component nature of student agency requires researchers to clearly define and operationalise their understanding and conceptualisation of agency. It is equally important to distinguish between facilitators of agency and its indicators. Research within psychology has significantly advanced our understanding of the complexities of the learning process. It has helped in clarifying how motivational, cognitive and affective factors, in interaction with environmental factors, relate to human behaviour, and explain why some students exhibit more initiative and agency in learning than others within specific contexts (Bandura, 2008; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). In this context, self-efficacy and its connection to self-regulation mechanisms are recognised as critical for understanding student agency (Bandura, 2006, 2011; MacIntyre et al., 2009; Mercer, 2011, 2012). In education, self-efficacy, as a motivational construct, refers to students' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks and achieve learning goals (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, within his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1997, 2006) posits that self-efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. In line with this, Dörnyei's (2001) taxonomy of motivational strategies highlights the importance of increasing learners' expectancy of success. Agency is understood to arise from students' personal belief system as they need to believe in their capacity to control and manage their own learning (Gao, 2010; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021; Mercer, 2011, 2012). As Mercer (2012) explains, for students to actively exercise agency, they first need to possess a personal sense of agency, namely, the fundamental belief that their actions and behaviour can positively impact their learning within a specific environment.

In ESP learning, considerable emphasis is placed on the educational purpose, value, and relevance of learning in relation to students' professional needs and

aspirations. Learners in ESP contexts are generally aware of the importance of acquiring the target language, given its direct relevance to their academic and professional goals (Martín-González & Chaves-Yuste, 2024). Task value, which refers to students' perception of the usefulness and importance of the course, has been identified as a key motivational factor influencing proactive learning behaviour (Gan et al., 2023; Hoi, 2022). How much students exercise their agency in learning may depend on how much they value the ESP course and whether they find it interesting. Accordingly, this study investigated the extent to which students' perceived task value predicts different aspects of their agency in the ESP context. Previous research has consistently confirmed the connection between motivational and behavioural factors in learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 1985; Pintrich, 2000). To gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of student agency within the ESP context, this study explores how self-efficacy and task value are associated with students' agentic efforts and behaviours in their language learning.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature underscores the importance of affective variables in enabling student agency (Bandura, 2006; Mercer, 2011). Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is recognised as a complex psychological factor that can significantly influence the success of language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). A considerable body of research has focused on FLA and its potentially detrimental effects on students' performance and the language learning process (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre, 2017). According to Horwitz et al. (1986), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is a specific type of anxiety that students experience in language classrooms comprising three key components: communication apprehension (fear of speaking a foreign language in class), fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Studies indicate that anxiety can trigger avoidance behaviours and that students with higher levels of FLCA are generally less inclined to participate in classroom communication (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Serroul, 2015). Čepón (2016) reports that pre-experience ESP students' speaking anxiety is primarily caused by limited mastery of subject content in both their native language and English, which creates challenges when discussing unfamiliar topics, speaking without preparation, or performing complex professional tasks in English. Since FLCA tends to arise particularly when students are expected to communicate in the target language, its potential negative effects on student agency make it an important factor to address in both research and teaching. In this study, two subscales from the well-established Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986), communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, were used to assess students' FLA. These components are particularly relevant as they may inhibit students' willingness to interact and collaborate in the classroom (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz, 2001), making them highly relevant to the study's objectives.

As an empirical concept, agency in learning provides a framework that promotes critical reflection on current educational practices. It emphasises the

importance of students taking an active role in shaping their own learning processes and experiences. Furthermore, by connecting well-established and interrelated concepts such as autonomy, self-regulation, self-reflection, motivation, and belief systems, agency contributes to a deeper understanding and affirmation of student-centred education.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study investigates how anxiety variables, specifically communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, and motivational variables, including self-efficacy and task value, are related to three dimensions of student agency: student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and ESP agency. The study seeks to understand how these psychological constructs explain student agency as expressed through meaningful interactions and collaboration with teachers and peers in the context of ESP learning. Two hypotheses are proposed: (1) higher levels of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation will negatively predict student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and ESP agency, and (2) higher levels of self-efficacy and task value will positively predict greater student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and ESP agency.

### 3. METHOD

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#### 3.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 82 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in three different study programmes (Computer Science, Motor Vehicles, and Eye Optics) at the University of Applied Sciences Velika Gorica, Croatia, was analysed. All first-year students are required to take a compulsory ESP course. Most participants were male (70.7%) and aged between 18 and 29 (90.2%). About a quarter of the participants began learning English in kindergarten (22%), while the majority started in elementary school, particularly in the first grade (63.4%) or fourth/fifth grade (11%). A smaller number of students (3.7%) started learning English in secondary school. On average, students rated their English language proficiency as very good ( $M=3.87$ ,  $SD=.84$ ).

#### 3.2. Instruments

The Croatian version (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002) of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) was used to assess foreign language anxiety. The original FLCAS consists of 33 items and is structured to encompass three domains: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. For the purpose of this research, seven items related to communication apprehension and six items related to fear of negative evaluation



from the original scale were used. These items were selected because they specifically address communication and interactions within the classroom, aligning with the primary focus of the research and the university context. Students rated their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items include: "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class", reflecting communication apprehension, and "I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance", reflecting fear of negative evaluation. Factor analysis was used to examine the factor structure of the two scales used. Through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) conducted on the seven items related to communication apprehension, one latent factor was confirmed, explaining 56.89% of the variance. The factor loadings for individual items were satisfactory, ranging from .53 to .91. Similarly, factor analysis on the six items related to fear of negative evaluation revealed one factor explaining 56.94% of the variance with factor loadings between .61 and .90. In addition to the factor structure, satisfactory internal consistency was achieved for both scales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .87 for communication apprehension and .85 for fear of negative evaluation.

To assess students' self-efficacy, the Students' Self-Efficacy for Learning and Performance Scale from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich et al., 1991) was used. The scale focuses on students' perceived competence and confidence in completing classroom tasks and includes eight items. An example item is "I believe I will receive an excellent grade in this class". The overall score was formed as a simple linear combination of responses to individual items. EFA yielded a single-factor solution (Kaiser's criterion, eigenvalue > 1), which accounted for 64.04% of the total variance. All items loaded strongly on this factor (loadings between .58 and .89), suggesting that they reflect a shared latent construct associated with students' perceived competence and confidence in completing classroom tasks. The obtained reliability of the scale is satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

The adapted version of the Task Value subscale from the MSLQ questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1991) was used to assess students' perceptions of the importance, interest, and usefulness of the ESP course. Example item is "I believe the material in this ESP course is useful for me to learn". To align with the study's emphasis on ESP context, the scale was modified in a way that the item "I think I will be able to use what I learn in this course in other courses" was replaced with "I believe that professional English will be useful to me, for example, in my field, career, and interests". To ensure the questionnaire remained concise, and given that other items already assessed similar content, one original item, "I am very interested in the content area of this course", was excluded, resulting in a five-item scale. Employing a 5-point Likert scale has shown consistent reliability across various studies and samples. EFA confirmed a single factor solution (Kaiser's criterion, eigenvalue > 1), which explained 74.1% of the total variance. All items showed high loadings on the extracted factor (ranging from .785 to .918), indicating a common latent dimension

related to the perceived importance and usefulness of ESP. In the original study, the scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90. In our study, the task value scale showed strong reliability ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

Three scales were used to assess different aspects of student agency. All scales were of the Likert type, and students rated how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To measure student-teacher collaboration, the Agentic Engagement Scale (Reeve, 2013) was employed as it captures both students' collaborative engagement with teachers and their initiative to actively shape their learning. The scale consists of five items, including "I let my teacher know what I need and want" and "During this class, I express my preferences and opinions". EFA confirmed a one-factor structure. A single factor (eigenvalue = 3.46) explained 69% of the variance, with all items loading satisfactorily ( $\geq 0.7$ ). Reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ), supporting a unidimensional structure.

To measure student-student collaboration, four items from the Peer Learning and Help Seeking subscales from the MSLQ questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1991) were used. The original scales measure student collaboration with peers and their ability to seek and manage the support of others in academic settings. Items were chosen for their relevance to the context of student agency and included "Even if I have trouble learning the material in this class, I try to do the work on my own, without help from anyone", "I often set aside time to discuss the course material with other students from the class" and "When I can't understand the material in this course, I ask another student in this class for help". One original item, "I try to work with other students from this class to complete the course assignments", was modified to "I try to work with other students from this class to understand what I am doing well and what I need to improve". This modification was made to shift the emphasis from task completion to self-reflection, which is recognised as an important student agency practice that helps students recognise their strengths and identify areas for improvement. To ensure validity, EFA was conducted on the four items in total from the two scales, confirming that they loaded onto a single construct measuring student-student collaboration. This single factor (eigenvalue = 2.05) explained 51% of the variance, with all items loading satisfactorily ( $\geq 0.7$ ). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability was lower but satisfactory ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

The ESP agency scale was developed specifically for this study following an extensive review of the literature. It is designed to assess students' proactive and intentional efforts, as well as their adaptability in creating opportunities to use and learn professional English, since no such instrument tailored to the context of ESP was available. The scale comprised four items, including "I am happy to propose or contribute to topics/content relevant to my professional language and field, or to share my ideas", "I adapt my learning approach to improve my knowledge of professional language", "I actively make an effort to expand my vocabulary and language skills important for my profession and interests", and "I actively engage in discussions and activities that involve using the language of my profession and field



of study". These items sought to capture key aspects of student agency within the ESP context, reflecting students' willingness and initiative to contribute to their learning. EFA confirmed a one-factor structure. A single factor (eigenvalue = 2.77) explained 69% of the variance, with factor loadings above 0.81. Reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ), supporting a unidimensional structure.

### 3.3. Procedure

Data collection took place during March 2024. A self-report questionnaire was employed to collect data in four smaller classroom groups, each consisting of approximately 20 students. The questionnaire was administered to the students at the beginning of their English class. The questions were written in Croatian to accommodate students with varying levels of English proficiency. The questionnaire was tested with a group of students beforehand to ensure that the translated items were clear and easily understood. Furthermore, to focus on the relationship between student-related variables and agency, participants were selected from a single university where students were exposed to similar learning conditions. This approach was intended to minimise the influence of environmental factors, ensuring that variations in student agency could be more directly attributed to individual student-related variables. Given that the study examined students' emotions and beliefs, it was essential for students to be in an environment that contributed to or influenced their emotions and beliefs. It was clarified that there were no right or wrong answers, and the importance of being open and providing genuine responses to the questions was emphasised. Statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS v27 statistical package. The sample of participants and the overall results on the scales used were described using standard univariate statistical procedures. The factor structure of all scales used was examined through factor analysis, based on which instrument adaptations were made. The degree of association between constructs was determined using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The reliability level was evaluated using internal consistency measures (Cronbach's alpha). Regression analysis was used to examine the extent to which predictor variables explain student agency.

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## 4. RESULTS

The aim of the study was to examine how anxiety variables (communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation) and motivational variables (self-efficacy and task value) relate to different dimensions of student agency (student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration, and ESP agency).

Scale	M	SD	Range	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE	$\alpha$
Communication apprehension	2.76	0.85	1-5	-0.01	0.27	-0.72	0.53	.869
Fear of negative evaluation	2.68	0.83	1-5	0.30	0.27	-0.30	0.53	.845
Self-efficacy	3.80	0.77	1-5	-0.67	0.27	0.64	0.53	.910
Task value	4.24	0.70	1-5	-1.19	0.27	2.25	0.53	.911
Student-teacher collaboration	2.87	0.88	1-5	0.43	0.27	-0.38	0.53	.886
Student-student collaboration	3.40	0.85	1-5	-0.48	0.27	-0.05	0.53	.659
ESP agency	3.19	0.88	1-5	-0.05	0.27	0.04	0.53	.849

Note.  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha. SE = Standard Error

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for study variables

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the key study variables. Two aspects of FLCA considered were communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. On a 5-point scale, where 1 indicates low anxiety and 5 high anxiety, participants reported a moderate level of communication apprehension ( $M = 2.76$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ) and fear of negative evaluation ( $M = 2.68$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ ). These results suggest that students experience a moderate degree of discomfort when communicating in a foreign language and moderate concern about being negatively evaluated during foreign language use in the classroom. Further, students reported above-average self-efficacy for learning and performance ( $M = 3.80$ ;  $SD = 0.77$ ), reflecting moderately high confidence in their ability to understand course content, master skills, and perform well on assessments. Additionally, students rated task value highly ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $SD = 0.70$ ), indicating that they perceive academic tasks as highly valuable and meaningful. Regarding student agency, the results varied across different scales. Results show that students rated student-teacher collaboration ( $M = 2.87$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ) the lowest, indicating that they are least inclined to initiate interactions and engage in collaborative behaviours with teachers, such as communicating their preferences, interests, and needs or asking questions. In contrast, student-student collaboration received the highest rating ( $M = 3.40$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ), suggesting that students are more inclined to engage in collaboration with their peers and seek feedback and support from them. For the ESP agency, the average score ( $M = 3.19$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ) indicates a neutral to slightly positive tendency to take initiative by proposing or contributing to relevant topics, sharing ideas, and adapting their learning approach to improve their professional English skills. Indicators related to the asymmetry and inclination of the distribution of results, considering the corresponding standard errors, indicate the approximate normality of the distributions on all the scales that were used. Thus, no major deviations from normal distribution were observed in the dataset.

As shown in Table 2 below, Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine the bivariate relationships between the variables. A strong positive correlation was found between the two anxiety variables (communication

apprehension and fear of negative evaluation), suggesting that students who experience higher levels of communication apprehension are also more likely to fear negative evaluation.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Communication apprehension	1	.88**	-.56**	-.09	-.39**	.03	-.16
2 Fear of negative evaluation	.88**	1	-.52**	-.012	-.34**	-.04	-.11
3 Self-efficacy	-.56**	-.52**	1	.50**	.43**	.31**	.44**
4 Task value	-.09	-.12	.50**	1	.32**	.38**	.48**
5 Student-teacher collaboration	-.39**	-.34**	.43**	.32**	1	.44**	.68**
6 Student-student collaboration	.03	-.04	.31**	.38**	.44**	1	.52**
7 ESP agency	-.16	-.11	.44**	.48**	.68**	.52**	1

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix used in regression analysis

Additionally, both anxiety variables showed moderate negative correlations with self-efficacy, indicating that increased levels of language-related anxiety may be associated with lower levels of self-efficacy, potentially impacting their perceptions of competence and ability in academic settings. Self-efficacy displayed a moderate positive correlation with task value, suggesting that students with higher levels of perceived self-efficacy also tend to perceive learning tasks as more important and meaningful. This relationship underscores the motivational role of self-efficacy in promoting engagement and persistence in academic tasks. Both self-efficacy and task value showed moderate positive correlations with student-teacher collaboration, student-student collaboration and ESP agency. These findings indicate that strengthening students' beliefs in their abilities and the value they place on tasks can enhance collaborative learning behaviours and foster a more supportive and engaging educational environment.

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of anxiety and motivational variables on different dimensions of student agency, using three models (see Table 3 below). Each model regressed the predictor variables on a specific dimension of student agency: student-teacher collaboration (Model 1), student-student collaboration (Model 2), and ESP agency (Model 3). In Model 1, where predictor variables were regressed on student-teacher collaboration, the overall model was statistically significant ( $R = .50$ ,  $R^2 = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) explaining 25% of the variance of student-teacher collaboration. Model 2 regressed predictor variables on student-student collaboration and was also statistically significant ( $R = .46$ ,  $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), explaining 21% of the variance of student-student collaboration. In Model 3, predictor variables were regressed on ESP agency,

yielding a statistically significant model ( $R = .54$ ,  $R^2 = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ) explaining 30% of the variance of ESP agency.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	$\beta$	SE	B	$\beta$	SE	B	$\beta$	SE
Communication apprehension	-0,34	-0,32	0,23	0,40	0,40	0,22	-0,18	-0,17	0,22
Fear of negative evaluation	0,06	0,05	0,22	-0,21	-0,20	0,22	0,25	0,24	0,21
Self-efficacy	0,19	0,16	0,16	0,34*	0,31	0,16	0,34*	0,29	0,16
Task value	0,28	0,22	0,15	0,29	0,24	0,15	0,44*	0,35	0,14
R	.50**			.46**			.54**		
R <sup>2</sup>	.25			.21			.30		

Note. N=82. In Model 1, predictor variables are regressed on student-teacher collaboration. In Model 2, predictor variables are regressed on student-student collaboration. In Model 3, predictor variables are regressed on ESP context agency; \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** Regression coefficients of anxiety and motivation variables on student agency

The  $\beta$  (beta) coefficient indicates the relative importance of each predictor, with higher values reflecting stronger contributions to the outcome variable. Across all three models, self-efficacy consistently showed a positive relationship with different dimensions of student agency, reaching statistical significance in both Model 2 and Model 3. Task value also emerged as a significant predictor in ESP agency (Model 3), highlighting its relevance in fostering student agency in the ESP learning context. These findings emphasise the central role of self-efficacy and task value in enhancing student agency, while the effects of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation appear to be less pronounced.

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## 5. DISCUSSION

Foreign language learning is highly interactive in nature, and the lack of students' voluntary and proactive rather than reactive contributions presents a considerable challenge for educators. Many students in foreign language classrooms struggle with feelings of disconnection, lack of interest and hesitation toward using the foreign language, initiating interaction or taking ownership of their learning. As Mercer (2015) points out, agency is an essential characteristic of effective learners and plays a crucial role in recognising and understanding their engagement, motivation, independence, and ability to self-regulate. Therefore, it is important to deepen our

understanding of what student agency entails and the factors that influence it, whether positively or negatively.

This study proposes a framework for considering student agency within the ESP context, offering deeper insight into how anxiety and motivational variables relate to the three distinct aspects of student agency among first-year non-English major university students in Croatia. Two primary hypotheses were tested. The findings did not support the first hypothesis as neither communication apprehension nor fear of negative evaluation predicted student agency. However, the study did reveal a negative correlation between students' anxiety levels and their self-efficacy. This finding aligns with previous research, which consistently demonstrates a negative association between students' foreign language anxiety and their perceived competence and self-efficacy (Dörnyei, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Jiang & Dewaele, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 1997). Mills et al. (2006) highlight the critical role of self-efficacy in achieving language proficiency, suggesting that fostering self-efficacy has positive effects on linguistic behaviour and could reduce the need for applying strategies to reduce student anxiety. Similarly, Yun et al. (2018) found that students with the highest self-efficacy experienced the lowest anxiety levels and demonstrated the best self-regulation along with highly productive teacher relationships, while those with the lowest self-efficacy experienced the highest levels of anxiety.

In the current study, the combined effect of high self-efficacy and task value may have mitigated the impact of anxiety, helping students manage emotional discomfort and stay engaged. When students perceive the relevance of learning a foreign language and see its alignment with their disciplinary and career interests, it supports deeper learning (Hutchinson & Waters, 1992). In line with the concept of facilitative anxiety, moderate levels of anxiety may even enhance performance by motivating students to take initiative and actively engage in their learning (Horwitz, 2001; Scovel, 1978).

Further, students selected for the study attend smaller classes, which allows for more flexible student-centred and learning-focused practices. Research suggests that smaller class sizes contribute to better teaching effectiveness and to a more positive classroom climate, where students feel more comfortable, experience less anxiety when using a foreign language, and develop a stronger sense of community (Harfitt & Tsui, 2015; Yi, 2008). In contrast, large classes often reduce student visibility and limit interaction. Undoubtedly, emotions play a significant role in FLL. While much research has investigated the effects of FLA, more recent studies have focused on exploring the effects of fostering students' positive emotions. Rather than only aiming to eliminate anxiety, scholars highlight the educators' role in cultivating and maintaining a low-anxiety, positive learning atmosphere and relationships (Dewaele et al., 2017; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). It is increasingly suggested that classrooms should promote a more balanced emotional experience for students and positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, optimism, efficacy,



compassion, and enthusiasm (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dewaele et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Regarding the second hypothesis, the results from the multiple regression analyses revealed that self-efficacy and task value significantly predicted certain aspects of student agency. Furthermore, both self-efficacy and task value were positively correlated with all three aspects of student agency. These findings partially confirm the second hypothesis. Specifically, in this sample of first-year university students, self-efficacy emerged as the strongest predictor of student-student collaboration (Model 2) and ESP agency (Model 3). This suggests that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to collaborate with their peers, engage in conversations, and seek assistance when needed. Research indicates that such interactions and collaboration are invaluable not only for practising language skills but also for forming high-quality relationships, which can increase motivation and engagement (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Furrer et al., 2014).

Also, the results suggest that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage proactively in learning when activities and topics are related to their field of study. These findings support previously established associations between students' beliefs in their competence and abilities and different forms of student engagement (Bandura, 1997; Mercer, 2015). To be agentic, students must believe in their ability to improve. They also must feel that they have some control over their learning and perceive tasks and learning as valuable and meaningful (Mercer, 2015). The overall high average score on the self-efficacy scale, reflecting a positive outlook towards academic challenges, is encouraging. However, it remains uncertain whether their high confidence and optimism will persist. As academic tasks grow more complex and demanding over time, and as various distractions arise, students' perceptions of self-efficacy are likely to fluctuate.

Interestingly, the study revealed that task value positively predicted ESP agency (Model 3), thus partially supporting H2. Students also reported high ratings for task value, suggesting that they perceived their ESP course as highly relevant, useful, and important. This positive association implies that students who recognise the importance of their ESP course are more inclined to take initiative and seek opportunities to use the foreign language. Their agentic behaviour was reflected in taking the initiative to share ideas, making suggestions about topics related to their field of study, making choices, and actively engaging with teachers for feedback and clarification. In doing so, students not only enhanced their learning but also contributed to the overall classroom instruction. These findings support the view that, although all learners have the potential to act agently, the degree to which they do so depends on the personal significance they attach to their goals (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2021). ESP learning is oriented toward profession-specific communicative objectives, which can lead students to perceive task value differently than in a general English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Because ESP tasks are directly aligned with learners' academic or professional goals, their relevance and utility are often more apparent, which can increase learners' motivation and

engagement (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The results confirm that self-efficacy and the perceived task value of the ESP course hold significant motivational value, as students who reported high task value and self-efficacy are more likely to take an active role in managing their learning and work toward their learning goals. However, the findings reveal that students are least inclined to engage in active learning strategies that require direct interactions with teachers. This reluctance of students to interact and collaborate with teachers has been previously noted as a barrier to success in FLL (Swain, 2000). Strengthening student-teacher interaction is vital for the development of student agency and effective language learning. It is important to acknowledge that both situational and individual factors may hinder students' willingness and readiness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Nonetheless, there are strategies educators can use to foster positive relationships and encourage student initiative and agency.

In terms of implications for researchers and educators, promoting cross-disciplinary approaches in foreign language research is essential, as it broadens theoretical perspectives, deepens the understanding of complex issues, and supports the development of more effective solutions to multifaceted problems. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of cultivating a positive learning environment in which students perceive themselves as competent learners and where meaningful, relevant learning takes place. Teachers need to be committed to communicating more effectively themselves and fostering environments in which students find it natural to act with autonomy, confidence, and initiative, while engaging in meaningful social interactions and learning experiences.

Regarding the limitations of this study, one of the primary is the relatively small sample size ( $N = 82$ ), particularly in relation to the number of predictors included in the regression analyses. Small sample sizes can affect the stability and reliability of factor structures as well as reduce the robustness and precision of regression coefficients. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as statistical power is limited. The decision to select a smaller number of participants from a single university was driven by the intention to select students who have been exposed to a similar teaching approach and smaller class settings, given the study's focus on the interactional aspect of agency. However, the modest sample size, drawn from a single institution and limited to first-year non-English major students, restricts the generalisability of the results to broader ESP learning contexts. Nonetheless, the study provides valuable guidance for future research. As data were collected at a single point in time, the results provide insight into associations and correlations among the variables within a specific population. Future research would benefit from using larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions and educational settings to enable stronger conclusions and greater generalisability. Also, adopting a longitudinal design would provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of the examined factors.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite the growing emphasis on learner-centred approaches, research on student agency in English for Specific Purposes remains scarce, as most studies focus on general foreign language contexts. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the motivational and affective factors that shape agency in ESP classrooms, offering a deeper understanding of how ESP students actively take ownership of their learning. The paper provides valuable insights into the multidimensional and dynamic nature of student agency in the ESP context. Its findings offer a clearer understanding of how specific components of agency relate to foreign language anxiety and motivational beliefs in a university ESP setting. By highlighting the interactive dimension of agency, the study underscores the importance of engaging students in meaningful communication and classroom interactions. Enhancing language fluency requires that students actively participate in these interactions and create opportunities for learning. Although previous literature has highlighted the potentially debilitating effects of FLA, suggesting a possible negative association between anxiety and student agency, the current study did not confirm a direct relationship between anxiety variables and different forms of student agency. One possible explanation is that the combined effect of high self-efficacy and high task value may mitigate the impact of anxiety. In a positive classroom climate, where students feel supported and valued, FLA may coexist with agency and engagement, allowing students to proactively overcome language learning challenges. Consistent with decades of research, the findings indicate that students' self-efficacy and the value they assign to a learning task are positively associated with greater student initiative and proactive engagement. They underscore the critical role of motivational strategies, which should be considered essential components of successful language learning. This implies that in their capacity as facilitators, educators have a central role in creating a learning community that nurtures motivated, agentic learners. Students are more likely to perceive themselves as active agents when they understand the purpose of a task and its intended learning outcomes, enabling them to see the broader context of what they are doing and why it matters.

The key findings have significant practical implications for enhancing the motivational quality of ESP instruction and promoting autonomous student action. These include designing tasks and activities that align with students' needs and interests while strengthening a sense of relevance, value of learning, self-efficacy, and satisfaction in learning. Self-efficacy and perceived task value should be recognised as valuable internal drivers of student agency. Because ESP tasks are often directly aligned with students' academic or professional goals, their relevance and utility are typically more apparent than in general English language learning, which may enhance students' motivation and engagement. Nevertheless, building a community of collaboration and inquiry is challenging, and not all students may initially feel confident, autonomous, or connected. When students, however,

perceive themselves as competent, engaged and supported, they are more likely to experience positive emotions, which may have protective effects against anxiety. Fostering agency encourages students to work collaboratively and think and act more flexibly and creatively in addressing challenging learning situations.

Agency is about making autonomous and intentional choices about how one learns and taking meaningful action based on those decisions. However, given individual differences among students, it is important to gradually shift control and responsibility to students in a way that enables them to develop confidence in managing their own learning, while the teacher continues to provide a supportive and guiding presence. Building on previous research and pedagogical practice, this study contributes to the literature by examining the agentic functioning of university-level ESP students. It also offers a framework for empirically operationalising and measuring specific aspects of student agency relevant to learning English in an ESP context. The study hopes to inspire further research that will deepen the understanding of the concept of agency in ESP learning and refine the methods for its operationalisation and measurement.

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