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The REFLECT model: cultivating beginning language learner agency through eTandem conversations, transcriptions, and reflections

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Abstract: This qualitative case study is situated in the context of a beginning French language course at a Sino-foreign joint-venture institution in China. The course involved an eTandem component for ten Chinese students learning French who were paired with learners of Chinese in France. The eTandem was accompanied with iterative cycles of conversation transcriptions and guided reflections to think about how students prepared for their interactions, what they learned, what challenges they encountered, and what and how they planned to improve. Introducing the REFLECT model of reflections to support learner agency through metacognition, this article reports on the perceptions of students regarding their agency for linguistic and intercultural growth. The post-conversations and end of the semester reflections of the ten Chinese students were analyzed inductively and thematically. Findings indicate that students developed metacognition and learner agency by engaging in proactive behaviors including input, interaction, feedback, and information-seeking. This article provides theoretical and practical implications connecting eTandem, reflections, metacognition, and learner agency in the languaculture classroom, transcending the Franco-Chinese context.

Keywords: eTandem; reflective learning; metacognition; proactive language learning; agency; second language acquisition

1 Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE) is a pedagogical method integrating online intercultural interactions among groups of learners from different cultural or geographical backgrounds into the curriculum, guided by educators (O'Dowd 2018). VE, as a crucial tool for internationalization, facilitates online intercultural interactions as part of

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educational programs (O'Dowd 2021). However, research on VE has been largely focused on US contexts, second language learning, and intermediate levels (O'Dowd and Dooly 2022), with little attention to elementary-level or L3/L4 learners (third and fourth additional languages), non-language majors, or Chinese learners of French (Wang et al. 2012; Wang-Szilas et al. 2013). Additionally, research on VE's use of reflections to support language and intercultural learning remains scarce, although reflections are associated with a wide range of benefits related to metacognition and agency.

This study examines how Chinese students enrolled in a beginning French course developed and exhibited language learning agency by engaging in proactive behaviors through iterative cycles of eTandem exchanges, transcription, and guided reflection. These exchanges, a form of virtual exchange pairing students (O'Dowd 2021), were integrated into the curriculum to support language and intercultural learning and learner autonomy. Drawing on the Proactive Language Learning framework (Papi and Hiver 2024), the study analyzes the types of agentic behaviors students exhibited as they engaged with peers and reflected on the whole cycle of their experience. The findings contribute to research on languaculture learning and technology by exploring how structured virtual exchanges can scaffold proactive learning behaviors even at the beginning level. This article offers implications for languaculture courses by highlighting the value of transcription and reflection as tools to promote metacognition, agency, and internationalization at home in early stages of language learning.

2 Literature review

2.1 Agency in L2 learning

Building on extensive second language (L2) research related to motivation and learner engagement, Papi and Hiver (2024) reconceptualize L2 learning as a fundamentally agentic process – one in which learners actively think, make decisions, take action, reflect on their experiences, and derive new insights. Centering the learner's role in this process, they introduce the Proactive Language Learning Theory (PLLT), a framework that identifies four core types of agentic behaviors: input-seeking, interaction-seeking, information-seeking, and feedback-seeking (Papi and Hiver 2024, 2025).

According to this framework, language development is fostered not merely by exposure to the L2 environment, but through proactive behaviors, engaging with the affordances of input, interaction, feedback, and metalinguistic information. Through metacognitive awareness, learners assess their abilities, set goals, monitor their progress, and take purposeful steps to enhance their skills (Dörnyei 2019; Papi and Hiver 2024). Input-seeking behavior refers to learners' strategic efforts to immerse themselves in L2 input and make the most of exposure opportunities: "learners'

agentic and strategic efforts in seeking, creating, and using L2 input opportunities for the purpose of L2 learning” (Papi and Hiver 2024, p. 305). However, Papi and Hiver caution that exposure alone is insufficient. For input to be beneficial, learners must also engage with it deeply – paying attention, processing it for comprehension, and using it to form and test hypotheses about the language (pp. 304–305). Interaction-seeking behavior involves learners’ active pursuit of opportunities to use the language in communicative contexts. Such interactions serve as sites for negotiation of meaning and co-construction of knowledge. Information-seeking behavior is defined as learners’ proactive efforts to access and engage with explicit linguistic information, be it lexical, grammatical, phonological, pragmatic, or cultural, to enhance their language knowledge (Papi and Hiver 2024). Finally, feedback-seeking behavior encompasses both *feedback monitoring* (i.e., noticing and processing corrective feedback) and *feedback inquiry* (i.e., actively soliciting feedback or creating opportunities to receive it) (Papi et al. 2019; Papi and Hiver 2024). These behaviors reflect learners’ strategic use of external sources to refine their language performance and deepen understanding.

2.2 eTandem in languaculture courses

Virtual exchange (VE) supports languaculture learning, but research has primarily focused on Western contexts and second languages, with limited attention to students from the Global South or Franco-Chinese exchanges. Studies typically examine intermediate learners, showing positive effects at this level. This study fills a gap by exploring how perceived agency emerges through the metacognitive processes developed during eTandem exchanges and reflective activities for beginning-level Chinese learners of French.

VE has been widely studied for its impact on language learning outcomes (Akiyama and Saito 2016; O’Dowd 2007; Lewis and O’Dowd 2016; Luo and Yang 2022), intercultural competence (Çiftçi and Savaş 2018; Lewis and O’Dowd 2016), learner autonomy and motivation (Lewis and O’Dowd 2016; Terhune 2016), and digital literacies (Lewis and O’Dowd 2016).

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a key goal of VE, fostering global citizenship (ACTFL 2017; Council of Europe 2018). Defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations” (Deardorff 2006), ICC development may be limited if exchanges remain shallow or uncritical (Byram 2008), reinforcing stereotypes (Itakura 2004) or leading to an “illusion of commonality” (Ware and Kramsch 2005).

2.3 Virtual exchanges between Sinophones and Francophones

Few studies have examined VE between Asian and Western students (Rienties and Rets 2022), and even fewer have explored VE between Chinese and French learners (Wang et al. 2012; Wang-Szilas 2016, 2018; Wang-Szilas et al. 2013), though findings align with broader literature showing VE enhances language and intercultural competence (ICC), often emphasizing factual knowledge exchange.

Wang-Szilas (2016) studied Swiss learners of Chinese, who expected to improve oral skills and cultural understanding. Their perceived benefits included enhanced speaking abilities, better cultural awareness, and increased confidence. However, VE failures are common (O'Dowd and Ritter 2006). Wang et al. (2012) addressed potential eTandem obstacles between Swiss and Chinese students, finding their strategies helped students navigate common challenges.

2.4 Reflections, transcriptions, and metacognition: fostering agency among language learners

The process of reflection has long been identified both as a potentially effective tool and effect engaging students in successful learning, although its practice remains scarce in language classrooms for a myriad of reasons (Mynard 2023). Defined as “the intentional examination of experiences, thoughts and actions in order to learn about oneself and inform change or personal growth” (Mynard 2023, pp. 23–24), reflection is comprised, according to Savicki and Price (2017), of eight potential components including contextual, integrative, shifted perspective, and disaggregated/differentiated. Consequently, having gained prominence in education, reflections are associated with fostering conscious new behaviors, as past experiences shape present understanding and future actions. Used as a pedagogical tool to enhance learning, reflections require students to receive guidance on what constitutes effective reflecting, and how to engage in the activity to benefit from it. While some studies attempt to assess an objective benefit to reflection as a language-learning tool, the present study instead attempts to describe and explain the qualitative changes engendered in research participants.

Metacognition, a specific form of reflection, plays a crucial role in language acquisition (Haukås et al. 2018) and is defined as “awareness and reflection on one’s knowledge, experiences, emotions, and learning” (Haukås et al. 2018, p. 13). Flavell (1979) identified three components: 1) metacognitive knowledge (beliefs about learning abilities and strategies), 2) metacognitive experiences (awareness of effective learning practices), and 3) metacognitive strategies (intentional use of learning techniques).

Studies suggest reflections enhance metacognition in language learning by reactivating prior knowledge and encouraging learner-driven goal setting and agentic

behaviors. Transcribing oral tasks has long been recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool in language classrooms. While transcription of other people's oral output supports listening comprehension, engaging learners in transcribing their own output or even conversations with a partner brings additional benefits. It not only fosters self-awareness of speech patterns and of one's own errors, but it also raises awareness of their partners' language use and meaning negotiation. This reflective process helps learners identify areas for improvement, particularly in grammar and pronunciation (Cowie 2018), and increases their ability to retain and reproduce more accurate language forms, with or without additional teacher feedback (Cooke 2013; Lynch 2001, 2007; Stilwell et al. 2010). Lynch's work provides examples of how transcription can be used pedagogically in English for Academic Purposes. In their study involving intermediate-high learners who transcribed their own oral output and collaboratively revised it with a peer, Lynch found that students not only noticed and made a large number of changes to their original texts, but also shared initiative for those changes, with both partners contributing actively. Later, in their study comparing student-generated and teacher-generated transcripts, Lynch (2007) concluded that student-generated transcripts led to higher levels of accuracy. Similarly, Stilwell and colleagues (2010) reported on a specific class activity requesting students to transcribe their own poster presentations, make corrections to their recorded output with a partner, and receive feedback from the teacher, before engaging in a new cycle of presentation-transcription-correction-feedback with a different partner to encourage noticing, self-assessment, and reflection on one's language development and metacognition. These findings support that reprocessing one's own output fosters self-evaluation, enhances memory, and leads to improvements in oral output. In a study conducted in Japan, Cowie (2018) found that English learners reported in their reflections identifying errors through the transcription process. However, students rarely specifically pointed out the exact errors they had noticed, highlighting a potential area for further scaffolding or metacognitive support. Of particular resonance to the present investigation, Cooke's (2013) study on transcription of spoken performances, further evidenced the claim that transcription-cum-reflection enhances autonomy and improves the ability of students to understand and direct their own language learning.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research question

This study was guided by the following research question (RQ):

RQ: How do beginning-level Chinese learners of French online perceive and enact agency through metacognitive reflections in an eTandem?

3.2 Research context, participants, and sampling

The eTandem exchange began in Fall 2021 and continued through the first year of French. In the third week, both classes met online for an introduction. The study involved 10 first-semester French students (FR101) at a Sino-foreign joint-venture university in China. The Chinese learners of French were paired with 10 voluntary French learners of Chinese at a French “*classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles*” (post-baccalaureate level specific to France). All FR101 students were native Mandarin speakers, while the French students were native French speakers with at least five years of formal English education. A quick survey was sent to form partnerships based on hobbies, academic interests, and desire to exchange beyond the required conversations.

FR101 students conducted four 10-min conversations in French, following class topics but with room for broader discussion. All Zoom conversations were recorded and shared via the Learning Management System. The activity aimed to enhance metacognition, language awareness, and intercultural competence, particularly given the institution’s lack of advanced French courses and students’ reliance on instructors in Chinese education (Snow et al. 2017). To support these goals, students wrote reflections after each exchange, identifying new words, constructions, and insights about their partners and transcribed their conversations. Reflection expectations were set at the semester’s start. This research does not examine the Chinese-language portion of the exchange.

Following IRB approval and consent, data were collected from all 10 French learners using convenience sampling. No data were collected on the France-based partners beyond French learners’ reports. Since all students studied French at the same institution, in the same semester and section (Fall 2021), complete data collection was possible (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Table 1 describes the participants.

Table 1: Description of participants using pseudonyms.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Classification
1	Yizi	F	Public policy	Senior
2	Xiaolin	F	Media and arts	Junior
3	Yifei	F	Philosophy	Senior
4	Zirui	M	Data science	Senior
5	Feiyang	F	Environmental science	Senior
6	Hanjia	M	Data science	Senior
7	Yanwei	F	Physics	Junior
8	Jiajia	F	Political science	Junior
9	Xiaoyi	F	Media and arts	Junior
10	Xin	F	Media and arts	Senior

This qualitative case study examines the perceived effects of eTandem in a beginning online French course at a Sino-foreign liberal arts institution in China (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Conducted fully online in 2021–2022, and to provide context on the course structure, the course met twice weekly as a whole class and also included two 30-min individual sessions with francophone tutors (structured and unstructured) and a 30-min paired tutoring session with the instructor. The conversations with the eTandem partners were additional and treated as assignments.

3.3 Data collection

Data collection included four post-eTandem guided reflections with conversation transcriptions, one final semester guided reflection, and twelve short reports and instructor observations on coaching conversations per student. Audio-visual recordings and transcriptions of eTandem conversations by the participants were also gathered. French learners participated in four conversations based on class themes, posting four LMS blog reflections on preparation, experiences, challenges, and improvement plans, responding to the same prompt based on the REFLECT model. Each guided reflection ranged between 350 and 700 words.

The REFLECT model, developed based on Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle and Savicki and Price's (2017) components of reflection, was used to guide students, and is presented below (Figure 1).

Table 2 introduces the guiding questions of the REFLECT model which students answered following each conversation they had with their partner.

Students transcribed conversations, noting language features like expressions and fillers. At semester's start, the class analyzed "good" and "bad" reflection examples (Savicki and Price 2019). The final reflections averaged 1,200 words although there was no word limit. Three individual weekly (two with a course coach and one with the instructor) 30-min coaching sessions over twelve weeks facilitated discussions on reflections, conversations, and interaction analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Data from all written reflections and were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Creswell and Creswell 2018) to identify emerging themes related to agentic behaviors. Nvivo was used to tag reflections at the sentence or paragraph level with *in vivo* codes (Charmaz 2006), which were compared across participants and renamed when relevant, then grouped into categories (Morse 1994) before being classified within the larger theoretical framework of Papi and Hiver's (2024)

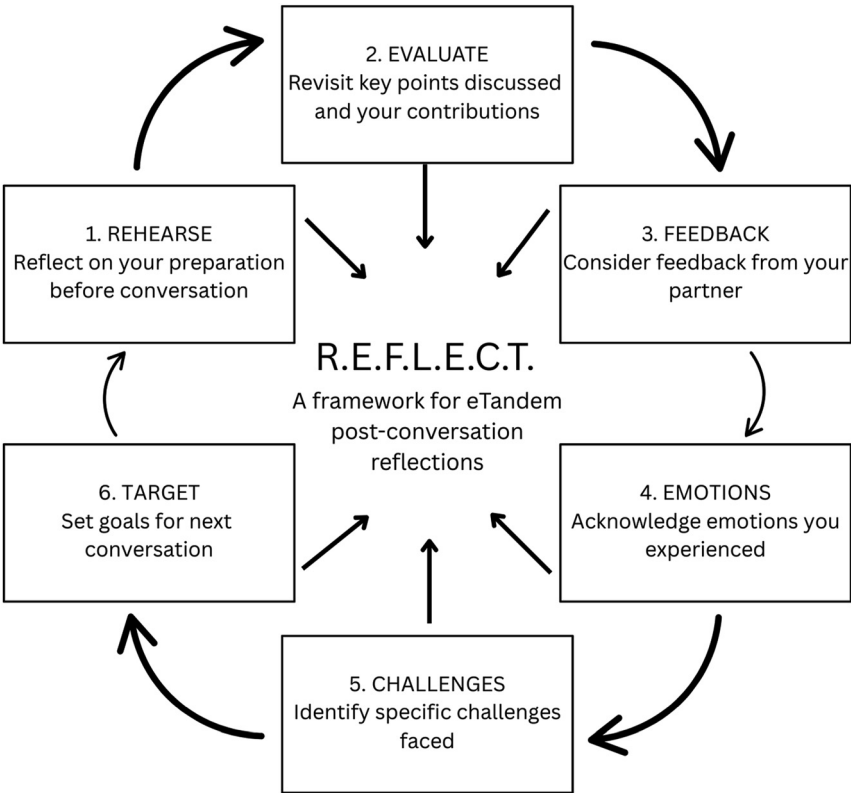


Figure 1: The REFLECT Model.

proactive language learning. Recordings and transcriptions provided context but were not analyzed separately. To ensure trustworthiness and validity, researcher triangulation and member-checking (Creswell and Creswell 2018) were used, along with temporal triangulation from multiple data sources.

4 Results

Results are presented according to the four behavioral dimensions of the Proactive Language Learning Theory (Papi and Hiver 2024, 2025): 1) input-seeking, 2) interaction-seeking, 3) feedback-seeking, and 4) information-seeking behaviors. These categories provide an analytical framework to understand how beginning-level learners exercised agency in an eTandem context.

Table 2: Guided reflection questions of the REFLECT Model.

Theme	Guiding questions
Rehearse	Reflect on your preparation before the conversation. What goals did you set? Which materials or vocabulary did you review?
Evaluate:	After the conversation, revisit the key points discussed and your contributions. Assess what went well and what could be improved. Think about your performance during the conversation. Were your communication strategies effective? Did you achieve your conversational objectives?
Feedback	Consider any feedback from your partner and self-assess areas for improvement. How did your partner give you feedback? Was it explicit (you said XX but instead you should say YY)? Was it implicit (reformulating a sentence and moving on without saying you said something they perceived to be incorrect)? What was it about (pronunciation, lexicon, grammar...)?
Learnings	Identify the key takeaways from the interaction. What new vocabulary, cultural insights, or communication strategies did you acquire?
Emotions	Acknowledge the emotions you experienced before, during, and after the conversation. How did they impact your communication?
Challenges	Identify specific challenges faced and strategies employed to overcome them.
Target	Set SMART (specific, manageable, achievable, relevant, time-based) goals for your next eTandem session, focusing on areas you would like to improve.

Across all phases of the learning cycle (preparation, interaction, reflection, and subsequent iteration), participants reported and demonstrated dynamic agentic engagement. Perceiving that they developed their languaculture skills is consistent with research finding that eTandem supports linguistic and intercultural learning, students’ reflections revealed individualized trajectories of agency indicating that each individual exercised agency in distinct ways, aligning with the theory’s emphasis that proactive behaviors are shaped by personal and contextual factors. It should be noted that the presentation of findings describes common experiences across participants (using pseudonyms), while also highlighting some individual nuances.

4.1 Input-seeking behaviors

Participants’ reflections often described deliberate efforts to seek or create opportunities for exposure to French, signaling a proactive approach to vocabulary building, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and grammatical understanding. Although this behavior was neither systematic nor linear, an evolution across the four eTandem conversations and successive REFLECT cycles suggested a progression from passive or reactive engagement to more intentional and self-directed proactive

learning behaviors. In alignment with Proactive Language Learning Theory (Papi and Hiver 2024), learners demonstrated not only agentic orientation toward learning but also the capacity to anticipate, seek out, and optimize learning opportunities beyond formal instruction. This process was scaffolded by the REFLECT model, which encouraged reflection, evaluation, and planning. These are key metacognitive strategies for self-regulated learning. The findings below are presented in three interrelated themes that trace how learners actively constructed opportunities for linguistic input and growth.

4.1.1 Recognizing gaps and transcending the curriculum

In the early stages, students primarily relied on classroom exposure to prepare for their first eTandem conversation. However, the transcribing process following the first exchange acted as a metacognitive trigger, helping them notice input gaps. This aligns with metacognitive knowledge, specifically learners' understanding of their own linguistic limitations and the demands of the task. For instance, Xiaolin's realization that she needed to learn vocabulary not included in class content marks a shift from passive or reactive to proactive behavior:

I had to look up words and pronunciations of words [...]. I spent many hours doing that extra research and I think it was worth it (Xiaolin, post-conversation 1)

In the second conversation, Xiaolin highlighted the need for authentic, contextual input for language learning, and began to embrace the unpredictable nature of language use:

I thought I knew some basic words about professions but I neglected that these words only work for a small group of professions. [...] I think I can never be fully prepared for this. I can learn as I am exposed to more words. (Xiaolin, post-conversation 2).

This awareness reflects PLLT's emphasis on agentic engagement and the recognition that meaningful input often lies outside structured environments.

4.1.2 Input-seeking through transcription: from noticing to planning

The transcription process emerged as a powerful space for metacognitive regulation, specifically monitoring and evaluation, and for input-seeking behavior, especially as students confronted what they had misunderstood or not noticed during the exchange. Students identified shortcomings in listening comprehension and used these moments to seek new input. For instance, Feiyang noticed discourse markers while transcribing, reporting in her reflection post-conversation 2:

I think I learned a lot of words when I try to write the transcript. For example, “Du coup”, “plein de choses”, “enfin”.

Similarly, Xin explained *“These words confused me [...] but actually they are just transition words”* (Xin, post-conversation 2).

This awareness, followed by her decision to compile a list of transition words, illustrates metacognitive strategic planning and the development of proactive learning habits. Though there was sometimes a delay between noticing and action, the reflection cycles helped bridge that gap: *“I feel that I need to learn some transition words in French.”* (Xin, post-conversation 2). However, despite this recognition, Xin observed in her third reflection that she had not fully addressed the issue: *“I think I’ll need to learn more about transition words in French rather than saying ‘eh’ or ‘umm’,”* suggesting a discrepancy or delay between awareness of a lack of knowledge and actual information or input-seeking behavior. It was only following her third conversation that she made a list of transition words encountered in her transcript. Her fourth conversation demonstrates her deliberate experimentation with this new vocabulary, thus showing intentionality and proactive behavior in her L2 output. Such learner-driven input-seeking behaviors are central to PLLT’s concept of directed motivational currents, where sustained engagement emerges from meaningful goals and learner autonomy (Dörnyei 2019; Papi and Hiver 2024).

4.1.3 Becoming an independent language learner: personalizing input and strategic resource use

As students gained experience through the iterative REFLECT cycles, they began to personalize their preparation, integrating self-selected resources, experimenting, and testing individual intentional strategies. Several participants indeed noted that while they had prepared questions, they often lacked vocabulary and strategies to appropriately continue the conversation following their partner’s response to keep the conversation flowing. Feiyang, for instance, explained how she planned to adapt her future preparation after her first interaction:

I think [what] I could improve the next time is that I can try to reply to her response instead of directly jumping into the next question. I prepare the conversation by proposing questions I would like to ask. But it is not very sufficient. I would try to guess her possible answers and accumulate relevant vocabulary and practice more by talking with myself (post-conversation 1).

Her third reflection illustrates how she implemented her plan:

I try to respond to her answer. I think this time is more like conversation. I gave some actual comments and now we can resonate with each other. For example, I said we have the same taste.

Feiyang's reflections exemplify metacognitive planning and the PLLT concept of autonomy-supportive regulation. Additionally, she experimented with video-watching strategy by listening with English subtitles, then French, demonstrating a growing system of input-seeking strategy that is structured, sustained, and intrinsically motivated, explaining: *"I watch the video three times. The first time, I listen with the English subtitles, the second time, I listen with French subtitles."* (post-conversation 3).

Hanjia, too, moved from frustration to a structured approach, using transcripts to diagnose weaknesses and then adjusting his preparation accordingly, qualifying the transcribing process as *"the main learning tool of the experience"*, explaining *"It's like making it up after not taking enough advantage of it"* (Hanjia, final reflection). His reflections and conversations demonstrate he identified vocabulary gaps and the challenge of understanding questions with different structures from what he had learned, using the transcribing process and input opportunity to then seek information to fix these shortcomings:

Vocabulary is still the major issue. Another thing is to get familiar with multiple expressions for the same meaning. Sometimes I get it when the question is in one format I learnt, once it changes a little bit, I fail to get it.

In the third conversation, Hanjia reported a more structured preparation based on the shortcomings he had identified, showing a clear attempt at addressing these challenges: *"I prepared several sample answers to the possible questions and practiced them"* (post-conversation 3).

Finally, Xin connected her personal interest in cinema and music as a student majoring in Media and Arts to motivation and language input: *"I remind myself of my motivation [to learn French] by watching films and searching information about film festivals"* (final reflection). This is a clear example of how her identity emerged and influenced her proactive behavior, supporting research arguing that language learning is enhanced when aligned with learners' personal values and interests (Dörnyei 2019; Papi and Hiver 2024).

4.2 Interaction-seeking behaviors

The participants' interaction-seeking behaviors demonstrate agentic approaches related to their capacity to anticipate, adapt, and create interaction opportunities to use the target language, seek information on the language and culture, and receive feedback from their partners and coaches. The reflections and transcripts of the conversations demonstrate students' heightened metacognition by intentionally planning such interactions, including through transcending the course

requirements, monitoring the form and content of interactions, and evaluating their conversation.

4.2.1 Initiating and shaping interactions: proactive engagement and goals

Students exercised their agency by gradually modifying how they interacted with their partners. Some students asked to meet more frequently than required, or to connect on social media, while others reoriented conversations to conform to the course requirements or to their interests. These choices reflect strategic planning and goal revision which are characteristic of PLLT. For instance, Hanjia shifted his focus from task completion to skill development, acknowledging that concentrating on his performance for the grades led to superficial engagement:

I worried too much about the grades, so it did not go as a communication but like acting. It is meaningless if I do it this way. (Hanjia, post-conversation 1)

His subsequent reflection revealed a shift in his motivation:

Next time [...], I should focus more on the communication itself rather than viewing it as a test.

This evolution from performance to learning focus informed Hanjia's decisions to choose a pass/fail option for the course, and he noted *"Without the grading pressure, the talk was really enjoyable"*. Through his metacognitive adjustments of shaping his learning environment to reduce the affective filter, Hanjia demonstrates his capacity to regulate himself and his agency, thus transforming his interactions, while also highlighting the complexity of interaction-seeking behaviors Papi and Hiver (2025) discuss: Hanjia, as a proactive agent, distanced himself from a partially limiting utilitarian perspective of the conversation (demonstrating skills for a grade) to instead connect with another student on the other side of the world. Other students, like Feiyang, reported being more explicitly intrinsically motivated from the start of the exchange:

I tend to think that interview [conversation] is more like a meeting and greeting between friends, rather than an assignment as a whole.

These interaction-seeking behaviors thus support the variety, intertwined, and evolving purposes of exchanges which Papi and Hiver (2024, 2025) advance, as students here leveraged the eTandem conversations as language development opportunities while also perceiving them as authentic social interactions, thus contradicting Atkinson's comment (2025) that PLLT reduces interaction-seeking behaviors to instrumentality.

4.2.2 Language use and negotiation strategies: balancing comprehension with target language commitment

The students shared they often felt a tension between wanting to practice their linguistic skills and wanting to exchange information no matter the language. While some participants or even their partners relied on English as a lingua franca to overcome language barriers, others actively asked their partners to remain in the target language, revealing differing agentic behaviors to surmount struggles. Xin explained she felt emboldened as she grew more comfortable, explicitly asserting her preference to force the conversation in French: *“I asked her to respond in French as well.”*

Xiaoyi’s agentic behavior was instead demonstrated in her relying on the value of partial English use as an occasional crutch to check their understanding:

[...] there were times when she would explain in English. This is certainly useful because it is much like a second or third review...

Although reliance on English may hinder immersion, it also enabled deeper comprehension and allowed students to occasionally see connections between English and French, and to note that in less controlled interactions codeswitching is often a common strategy they themselves employ on their own campus, thus gaining awareness of the strategies they already use to maintain communication.

4.2.3 Metacognitive awareness through transcription

Reviewing the recordings of their interactions and transcribing the conversations served as a catalyst for self-awareness and self-assessment of communication. This reflective practice through transcribing enabled participants to critically assess their communicative behaviors, including concerning turn-taking dynamics, and tried to adapt accordingly. For instance, Yifei recognized a pattern of unintentional interruptions:

I noticed I unintentionally interrupted [my partner] several times... I definitely need to pay more attention to this and leave more time for [my partner] to finish first.

Her statement indicates a heightened sensitivity to conversational flow and norms – and an intent to improve turn-taking, key to successful intercultural interaction.

Similarly, Xiaolin connected multisensory input to better learning, thus asking her partner to write down words in the chat:

I think it is hard for me to remember if I don't know how to pronounce what I need to remember.

I think it is important to combine visual memory and audio memory together for a new language.

Participants reported gaining more confidence with this awareness and demonstrates refinement of strategies, even as simple as they may seem, in regulating cognitive processes, thus highlighting a growing agency as learners developed a growing awareness of what worked for them.

Participants gradually developed confidence to seek clarification rather than pretend understanding. For example, Hanjia shifted his posture from a face-saving approach, acknowledging at first *"I have to pretend I understand,"* to an acceptance of being a beginner, which supported his learning:

Je ne comprends pas. Comment dit-on 'couscous' en anglaise?

This time I did not rush through, I gave it more patience and asked the interviewee to explain more.

Likewise, Feiyang's reflections also demonstrated early awareness and behaviors to support her needs: *"I tried] to say 'Moins vite, s'il te plaît' before the recording starts"* (post-conversation 2). The variety of strategies students used, such as gestures, repetitions, synonyms, reformulations, chat box writing, to stay in the target language allowed them to claim a sense of control over their experience and learning.

Additionally, the diverse ways of asking questions made students acutely aware of the limitations of languaculture courses and that conversations rarely go in a scripted way:

I prepared the keywords of the questions I am going to ask. Then practised several times before the official interview. I think it is enough for preparation. However, when my correspondent said something that I did not expect, I will become nervous. (Yanwei, post-conversation 1).

The awareness of their linguistic limitations often motivated students to identify what they needed to do to improve and to act on their needs:

Vocabulary is still the major issue. Another thing is to get familiar with multiple expressions for the same meaning. Sometimes I get it when the question is in one format I learnt, once it changes a little bit, I fail to get it. [sic] (Hanjia, post-conversation 3)

Hence, students practiced questions with their TAs, requesting *"a variety of questions to say the same thing"* or *"similar questions with different words"*.

4.2.4 Awareness of emotions as a driver of metacognition and intercultural development

Students often commented on the cultural aspects of their conversations and on their emotional responses. Embarrassment led students to reflecting on their expectations and biases, linguistic challenges, and prompted adjustments of behavior. Feiyang explained for example:

During the interview, I didn't get that the parents of my correspondent are divorced in the first place [...] I felt very guilty and embarrassed.

Xiaolin shared similar concern:

I was still nervous because I felt like I was not familiar with the expressions related to family. And family is such a sensitive topic so I didn't want to be offensive. During the interview, many times I had to ask her to repeat several times and I felt bad about it, especially when she had to explain many times that her dad was on arrêt. I was a little embarrassed but she encouraged me with her thumbs up when I finally understood what she was saying. After the interview, I feel like I could do better if the interview is carried out in person and I felt so grateful that she tolerated my repetitive questions. (Xiaolin, post-conversation 2).

These emotional responses, mostly rooted in embarrassment and face from misunderstanding and the potential to cause offense, motivated and incited the participants to prepare differently and to consider sociocultural context differences between China and France, thus enhancing their intercultural communicative competence, a key domain in PLLT.

4.2.5 Positioning oneself as a beginner

Several participants reported feeling motivated and invested when they felt their interlocutors considered them as genuine conversational partners:

I think my correspondent treats me as a real French. [...] This makes me think about my real thoughts [...] and inspires me to give more 'high-quality' answers. (Feiyang)

This positioning motivated some students to raise the authenticity of their responses by increasing their cognitive and linguistic complexity. This behavior highlights the motivational component of *proactive learning*: by feeling perceived as legitimate speakers, students were more likely to take risks, “*spending more time to prepare*” or looking for more personal vocabulary in their preparation. Feiyang's comment also demonstrates an evolution from scripted exchanges to authentic interaction, which is a central goal of eTandem.

Participants demonstrate that their interaction-seeking behaviors in the eTandem took various forms, as students went into these conversations with individual and contextual differences making them not only shape the interactions but also affect what they proactively paid attention to, differences consistent with Papi and Hiver's (2025) PLLT theory.

4.3 Feedback-seeking behavior

The guided-reflections included questions about the types of feedback students received, and what they learned from it, encouraging learners to reflect not only on the content of the feedback but also its form, their relationship to feedback, and ultimately the type of feedback they find helpful and how they in turn provide feedback to learners of Chinese and English. Reflections highlight that students engaged in feedback-seeking behaviors, especially regarding feedback monitoring, but more rarely in feedback inquiry. The eTandem conversations allowed for occasional corrective feedback from the partners, which the learners identified as mostly phonological and lexical, and more rarely grammatical and pragmatic.

4.3.1 Monitoring feedback

Participants' reflections revealed that students primarily engaged in feedback monitoring such as observing and interpreting feedback cues, rather than feedback inquiry. While students reported occasional corrections from partners, especially related to pronunciation and vocabulary, they rarely initiated feedback requests. Xiaoyi's reflection on her pronunciation illustrates how she both monitored and asked for explicit information:

[...] in addition to Camille's help in correcting some of my pronunciations, I also gained a deeper understanding of the liaison and practiced with her. She didn't know why [some words have liaisons and some not] either but was very patient in explaining it to me. (Xiaoyi, post-conversation 2)

The fear of "*incorrect pronunciation*," was frequently mentioned in reflections as a recurrent concern, underscoring the affective dimension of feedback monitoring and a focus on form over function. However, most students, reported that their partners rarely corrected them explicitly. They indeed explained that partners did not seem to pay attention to their pronunciation, grammar, and pragmatics, perceiving this behavior as prioritizing understanding and an uninterrupted conversation flow, or a form of mistake tolerance, as Xiaolin's reflection exemplifies:

We are still nice to each other and tolerate each other's mistakes. Even if there are mistakes and mispronunciations, it didn't really impede our conversation and our curiosity.

Students in the present context appeared to prioritize communicative flow and social rapport over linguistic correction, a behavior perhaps attributed to their beginner positionality or lack of confidence.

4.3.2 Perceptions of partner expertise on feedback

Several students suggested that their partners may not have positioned themselves as legitimate sources of corrective feedback, perhaps because of a lack of legitimacy, capacity, or responsibility. Yifei's reflection demonstrates how giving feedback also needs a particular type of expertise on the form of feedback-giving: *"She may not know how to help me improve French as well as [my coach] does"* (final reflection).

Other participants also noticed that corrections often came in indirect forms. For instance, Xin observed that her partner *"reconstructed her [Xin's] question"* without directly saying it was *"wrong"*, but Xin realized that while her initial question was understood, pragmatics were perhaps not reaching her partner's standards. She noted that often, even when writing to her partner to set up the conversation, she *"would think that [she] would ignore my minor mistakes in my writing and understand my messages"*, perhaps showing a hierarchy in linguistic areas for focus on feedback-seeking: a desire to receive more feedback in oral than in written output, or from certain people and contexts rather than other. Xin described that she prepared her conversations with her partner by having similar conversations with her sister who had been learning French longer, thus expecting her sister to give direct and explicit feedback without even being prompted:

when I practiced with my sister, [...] she will point out mistakes immediately rather than trying to understand. [...] I think this works for me better (Xin, post-conversation 2).

Here, Xin's behavior illustrates a self-directed strategy of intentionally creating feedback-rich environments through the multiplicity of interactions, providing her with iterative cycles for metacognitive control.

4.3.3 Transcriptions and reflections as feedback tools

Unsurprisingly, conversation transcriptions followed with reflections emerged as source of self-evaluation and metacognition to identify and respond to errors, reporting on perceptions of how they learn best, what supports their learning, and how to improve. These activities lead to agentic behaviors such as note-taking of mistakes and their correct forms, as Yifei explained:

the best way for me to improve my English is to learn from previous mistakes. And I think it works again for my French learning. I do memorize those things I forgot during the conversation clearer afterward (post-conversation 3).

the transcriptions are useful. Because it forces me to review the recordings again and again. And I need to hear my mistakes again and again. [...] I am the kind of person who learned a lot from my previous mistakes. So transcriptions definitely help me to correct (final reflection).

This retroactive self-assessment supports findings in prior studies showing transcription as an opportunity for feedback (Cowie 2018; Stilwell et al. 2010), but the REFLECT model seems to have served as a catalyst for metacognitive awareness by encouraging students to identify specific steps and resources to address mistakes they might have identified, or questions they might want to ask in class. This finding demonstrates how guided post-conversation reflections incorporating learner-generated transcriptions supported error noticing, as Lynch (2007) and Cowie (2018) found in their own studies.

4.3.4 Motivating role of positive peer-feedback

Occasional praise and positive feedback on L2 performance from partners, even non-specific comments, were reported as motivating and boosting confidence: “*I received some praise from the interviewee about my French and that helped motivating me a lot*” (Hanjia, post-conversation 2). This type of general feedback was inspiring, encouraging students to use the target language: “*She said my French was good and it was so encouraging!*” (Xiaolin, post-conversation 1). Although this is not a central aspect in Papi and Hiver’s work, this affective component of positive feedback encouraged students to sustain their efforts and engage in their conversations.

The recordings of all students’ conversations showed frequent meaning negotiation and indirect feedback, though some students did not always recognize subtle corrections from their partners. While most students did not mention seeking explicit feedback from their partners in their reflections nor did they exhibit such direct behaviors in the conversations, they sought feedback on their L2 performance through the iterative cycle of conversation, transcription of conversation, and reflection, using the transcriptions as objects of self-assessment, catching occasional errors they made by listening to themselves or to their partner’s responses, processing the linguistic information, and noting them in their guided reflections.

While Proactive Language Learning Theory posits that effective learners engage in both monitoring and inquiry, this study shows that feedback-seeking in early-stage of eTandem exchanges may be imbalanced with a strong orientation toward observation, reflection, and indirect learning. Students seem to be relying on what

they consider to be more “experts” than just speakers to ask for direct and explicit feedback.

Unlike previous studies in which explicit error correction accounts for the majority of error address (Luo and Yang 2022; Tang et al. 2021), participants in this study felt their improvements came from the exchange itself and repeated listening of the conversation, rather than explicit correction, suggesting that feedback does not need to be overt to be effective at this stage of language learning. Students indeed exhibited proactive agentic behaviors through self-initiated review cycles and with peer rehearsals, even in the absence of direct partner corrections. All students reported enhanced listening skills, the development of informal language, and increased awareness of generational or cultural language differences, viewing the eTandem as valuable for language learning, and the cycle of conversations-transcriptions-reflections as allowing feedback in various forms. This difference in explicitness of error correction could be due to students being beginners in both languages, and French students not wanting to correct their partners too much. This finding challenges traditional assumptions about the centrality of corrective feedback, and supports a more nuanced understanding of agentic learning behaviors in peer-led, intercultural environments, most particularly for beginners. This finding also highlights how metacognitive strategies can be cultivated even in informal, decentralized feedback contexts at the beginning level.

4.4 Information-seeking behaviors

Information-seeking behaviors are strategic and multifaceted, shaped by both linguistic needs and social or emotional motivations. These behaviors demonstrated not only the students’ agentic responses to perceived mistakes or gaps in their linguistic competence, but also as learners started feeling more connected to their partners, thus wanting to understand each other more and developing a desire to learn about Francophone countries.

4.4.1 From error noticing to identifying learning strategies

Supporting PLLT’s principle that learners take ownership of their language learning, participants here initiated information-seeking in response to noticing errors or shortcomings in their conversations with their partners, be it during the conversation or in the iterative cycle of reflection and transcription. Feiyang’s reflections exemplify the idea of monitoring, identifying difficulties with grammatical gender during her conversation with her partner, and planning to seek support to address this issue with her language coach:

I found I am quite confused about when to use the female form of adjectives and verbform. I will figure this out with the help of my TA. (post-conversation 4)

This behavior highlights Feiyang's early planning and the use of both course and external resources thanks to her growing metacognition and awareness of her language goals. Earlier, she shared her classification of her "*Grammar problems*" and how she chose to seek information or not:

I think my problems with grammar are divided into two types. The first one is about the small details, I consider them important, but I won't go crazy about these details considering my intention [to have a conversational level]. I think a good strategy for me would be trying to memorize them correctly the first time so that I can spend less time fixing them later. (post-conversation 2)

Despite being a beginner, and instead of adopting a reactive behavior to grammatical issues which she might develop throughout her learning and eventually choose to address, Feiyang's quote illustrates her foresight, perhaps based on her previous language learning experience with English. Here, she demonstrates her nuanced and contextual understanding of what she values in language learning: long-term efficiency over perfectionism, demonstrating self-regulatory behaviors.

4.4.2 Interpersonal connections as catalysts for information-seeking

Information-seeking behaviors were not limited to wanting to fix form-related issues. The growing affective connection with their partners led students to want to dive a bit more into their contexts, transcending their language to learn more about their cultural and geographic contexts through autonomous inquiry. Jiajia shared:

It was so nice to see a group of lycéens who are learning Chinese, and I felt connected with another part of the world.

Over time, she explained that her connection to her partner deepened her connection to France:

I feel more connected to that part of the world. My perception used to be gray, but now it's lightened up, motivating me to learn more about francophone cultures.

Jiajia's comments reveal an evolution from language learning as classroom activity to language learning as an interpersonal and global practice fostering intercultural curiosity. Indeed, as the eTandem unfolded, students reported researching their partners' cultures, demonstrating that information-seeking transcended linguistic dimensions to include broader cultural domains. This behavior often took the form of researching aspects of their partners' environment, as Xin explained:

She lives in Bordeaux so I prepared some questions related to the city. For example, questions related to vin rouge.

While surface-level and potentially essentializing, these information-seeking behaviors reflect the interaction between curiosity and agency. Similarly, Xiaoyi reported:

Since we were going to talk about our cities, I searched for famous places in Bordeaux... hoping to discuss them with Camille.

These examples of information-seeking behaviors demonstrate how curiosity prompted metacognitive evaluation and subsequent actions, thus leading students to take more control over the topics and depth of their conversations.

Information-seeking also led some students to confront their own stereotypes and raciolinguistic expectations, reflecting a deeper engagement with cultural complexity, as Yanwei exemplifies:

I noticed that it is very interesting that my partner is not a native French, but French is her first language... I thought immigration was only common in America. (post-conversation 1)

Yanwei's new awareness of immigration and France's colonial past, although naïve, points to critical reflection, although her reflection was not necessarily accompanied with a particular thirst to learn more. Similarly, Xiaolin recounted her assumption about Moroccan accents:

I thought since my interviewee is Moroccan, he might have a different accent that could be hard to understand. [...] However, to my surprise, both his English and French were so clear... (Xiaolin, post-conversation 4)

Later, she recognized her own essentializing biases of the multiculturalism of her partner:

I just automatically thought that she is a typical French person... ignoring the fact that I already know that her family is Turkish.

Although shallow, these comments demonstrate a heightened awareness not only of intercultural knowledge, but also of the students' need to check their biases and automatisms when entering conversations.

Further, while the core eTandem interactions were structured, most students continued their conversations informally, trying to remain in French or using English as a lingua franca to learn about each other's cultures and languages. These unscripted exchanges fostered further exploration and intercultural connection. Yizi noted:

We continued our discussions for another hour... we discussed the different hand gestures French and Chinese people use to demonstrate numbers... I had the chance to meet Noémie's father via Zoom. (post-conversation 1)

We discussed the usage of plastic in China and France... she was curious about my weekend routine. (post-conversation 2)

Yizi's comments illustrate how the eTandem emerged as a tool for sustained intercultural inquiry, with information-seeking emerging organically in response to real interpersonal curiosity.

In line with PLLT, information-seeking behaviors reported in this study were strategic, metacognitive, and learner-driven, but they were also deeply connected to social and affective aspects as learners developed their relationships with their partners. Students occasionally used the eTandem to clarify linguistic forms, thus contributing to explicit L2 knowledge (Papi and Hiver 2024), but students mostly used the opportunity to learn about France and the environments and backgrounds of their partners, deepening these intercultural interpersonal connections outside of the framed exchange. While not contradicting PLLT, this finding extends the framework by illustrating how social and emotional connections affect curiosity and reflection to shape information-seeking strategies, areas not deeply addressed by Papi and Hiver. Further, this adds empirical data and nuance to Papi and Hiver's (2024) hypotheses, as information-seeking behaviors during interactions were not exclusively about L2. This bridges metacognition and intercultural competence by showing how information-seeking is not just academic but identity-expanding by confronting biases and automatisms, including at the beginning level.

5 Discussion

This study investigated how beginner level Chinese learners of French perceived and enacted agency through metacognitive reflections in an eTandem context. The findings highlight that the integration of eTandem with iterative REFLECT cycles, comprising conversations, transcriptions, and guided reflections, enabled students to engage in and develop agentic behaviors aligned with the four dimensions of the Proactive Language Learning Theory (Papi and Hiver 2024): input-seeking, interaction-seeking, information-seeking, and feedback-seeking.

By making learners more aware of their language performance and learning processes, the structured reflection cycles cultivated metacognitive engagement, which served as the foundation for self-regulation and agency. As students reflected on what had gone well or poorly, they made decisions about how to improve, including planning new strategies for their next conversations. This included

searching for new vocabulary, studying pragmatic features like fillers and transitions, or exploring cultural topics to enrich interactions with their partners. In other words, these behaviors are evidence of input- and information-seeking behaviors. These agentic moves were not random or imposed, but originated from self-assessment and goal-setting, key aspects of self-regulation because of heightened metacognition facilitated by the REFLECT model.

While eTandem has traditionally been explored at higher proficiency levels (Luo and Yang 2022), this study shows that even beginners can benefit from structured virtual exchanges when reflective scaffolding is in place. Learners exhibited ownership of their progress and often went beyond course requirements, driven by the desire to improve and the enjoyment of authentic interaction. Over time, many participants moved from fear-driven motivations to a genuine sense of purpose and confidence in their L2 use.

The eTandem experience also prompted students to pursue more meaningful interaction-seeking behaviors, not just by showing up to the exchange but by actively trying to connect more deeply with their partners. Several participants described making conscious efforts to ask better questions, maintain conversational flow, and research information to improve connections, comprehension, and expression. This intentionality demonstrates students' agency in social interactions, consistent with PLLT's emphasis on learners actively creating their own affordances and changes in their learning environment.

Reflections also facilitated feedback-seeking, particularly in the form of self-monitoring and peer validation. While direct correction from partners was rare, many students reported becoming more attuned to cues from their partners or using transcripts to analyze errors or identify gaps in their performance. This feedback was then used to inform their preparation for subsequent exchanges, closing the loop between reflection and action, although only a few students were consistently explicit about the types of errors and specific actions they would take to bridge gaps in their competencies.

Students' perceptions of agency evolved over time. Initially anxious or focused on avoiding mistakes, they gradually began to see themselves as active participants in their own learning trajectories. Motivation increased as they witnessed improvement by revisiting previous reflections, reinforcing their investment in learning, and thanks to encouraging comments from their partners. The recursive nature of the REFLECT cycles iteratively reinforced language and cultural development thanks to increasingly specific and effective strategies and agentic behaviors. Although not clearly linear, reflections led to better preparation, which led to more successful interactions, which in turn boosted confidence and motivation. Many students voluntarily spent time beyond course requirements engaging

with new resources, practicing with more advanced peers to improve the eTandem exchange itself, or transcending the allotted time with their partner to learn more.

Though intercultural development was not a central focus of this study, some students moved beyond superficial comparisons to individuate their partners, signaling emergent intercultural sensitivity. Most avoided cultural essentialism, and their reflections suggest that guided support may help learners resist stereotypes and deepen their understanding of cultural complexity. However, the findings also revealed that many students still approached cultural differences cautiously, sometimes defaulting to generalized statements or avoiding intercultural topics altogether. This aligns with prior research warning against the “illusion of commonality” in virtual exchanges (Ware and Kramsch 2005), but it also suggests that structured pedagogical scaffolding can support learners in moving toward more nuanced cultural engagement (O’Dowd 2020, 2021; O’Dowd et al. 2020).

Students also emphasized the social and affective dimensions of the experience. Feeling validated by a partner or seeing tangible improvement in their speaking skills contributed to increased willingness to communicate beyond the classroom. Several students described using French in spontaneous situations, such as with native speakers or in language tables, demonstrating a desire to use their skills outside of the classroom and to maximize input and output opportunities in real-world contexts. Interestingly, many students highlighted how unique and valuable they found the experience of speaking with French speakers and non-Chinese peers, despite having access to international students at their institution or through other platforms. This mirrors Rienties and Rets’ (2022) findings that students in structured exchanges perceive them as more purposeful and rewarding than informal ones, emphasizing the importance of design, accountability, and teacher facilitation in making such experiences impactful.

Nonetheless, challenges persisted. As Kramsch (2006) reminds us, meaningful intercultural communication requires more than tourist-like competence; it demands a reflective and symbolic engagement with others. In this study, while students did not always reach such symbolic competence, their progression toward more agentic, reflective, and individualized interaction points to the pedagogical potential of combining eTandem with structured, iterative reflection – even at the elementary level.

In sum, this research contributes to understanding how agency can be cultivated early in language learning when learners are guided to reflect metacognitively on their experiences and take proactive steps to improve.

6 Conclusion and pedagogical implications

This study examined how beginning-level Chinese learners of French perceived and enacted agency through metacognitive reflections embedded in an eTandem experience. The findings demonstrate that guided, iterative reflection through the REFLECT model supported learners with planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own language use and learning, thus engaging in core metacognitive processes that fueled proactive learning behaviors.

Framed through the lens of Proactive Language Learning Theory (Papi and Hiver 2024), this research offers empirical evidence that guided metacognitive reflection fosters learners' ability to enact agency through self-initiated, goal-oriented strategies. The proactive behaviors observed, such as seeking additional input, interaction, feedback, and linguistic and cultural information, aligned closely with the four key agentic behaviors described in the theory. These behaviors were not isolated acts but emerged in response to reflective cycles that heightened learners' awareness of their own needs, performance, progress, and evolving interests.

This research highlights that even elementary-level learners, often perceived as too inexperienced for such practices, can benefit meaningfully from reflection when it is scaffolded and purposefully integrated into instruction. Their increased confidence, willingness to take initiative, and capacity to self-regulated learning and shape their affordances and learning environment, hallmarks of proactive language learning, suggest that reflection supports the development of agency not only as a theoretical construct but as a lived experience.

By integrating guided metacognitive reflection into eTandem, this study contributes to the literature on reflections, eTandem, while providing situated empirical data supporting Proactive Language Learning Theory. It shows how language learning environments can be intentionally designed to encourage learner agency, even at the earliest stages of language learning.

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