

Empowering Ethnic Minority Students' Mobile English Learning: A Conceptual Framework for College English Courses in China

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Abstract

College English (CE) is a compulsory, foundational course for most non-English majors in China, but its development continues to be shaped by exam-oriented assessment, large classes, and persistent tensions between communicative aims and local classroom realities. Within these structurally constrained conditions, efforts to integrate Mobile English Learning Resources (MELRs) often result in fragmented and uneven patterns of use, particularly in programmes that enrol high proportions of ethnic minority students. This conceptual paper proposes an integrated framework that combines the L2 Motivational Self System, Activity Theory, and agency–affordance perspectives to conceptualise how MELRs can be embedded within the CE activity system. The framework starts from the proposition that MELRs become motivationally powerful only when their affordances are actualised through direct personal,

proxy, and collective agency under particular rules, communities, and division of labour. Ideal L2 Selves are treated as the psychological basis of agency, while the L2 Learning Experience is modelled through behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement along the Subject–Object pathway of the activity system. Activity Theory provides the structure for locating how agency operates within CE classrooms that serve ethnic minority students, and agency–affordance perspectives clarify when designed affordances are transformed into learner-actualised affordances for English learning. The paper outlines research directions and pedagogical implications that follow from this framework and presents it as an analytical lens for future empirical work on mobile-assisted English learning in CE contexts.

Keywords: College English; Mobile English Learning Resources; L2 Motivational Self System; Activity Theory; agency; affordances

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, mobile connectivity has become common among university students in China, with smartphones serving as the main gateway to online information and learning. In higher education, College English (CE) is compulsory for most non-English majors. Despite sustained policy efforts to modernise English pedagogy through information technology, long-standing structural constraints still promote test-oriented practices and a narrow pedagogical focus. These conditions constrain teachers' and learners' capacity to integrate Mobile English Learning Resources (MELRs) into classroom routines; but implementation remains fragmented and uneven across institutions and rarely translates into consistent language-learning benefits.

While such structural challenges are widespread in Chinese higher education, their impact is particularly pronounced in minority-serving CE programmes. In these settings, disparities in digital infrastructure and learning opportunities intersect with cultural and linguistic distance between students' backgrounds and mainstream CE curricula (Jiang et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). As a result, implementing mobile-assisted English learning often requires navigating multiple, layered tensions—pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural—that are less visible in well-resourced universities. Understanding these dynamics provides a sharper lens for theorising how learners' motivational self-guides interact with activity-system structures to shape engagement with MELRs. This paper begins from the proposition that MELRs only become motivationally powerful when their designed affordances are actualised through direct personal, proxy, and collective agency within the CE activity system. In minority-serving CE programmes, empowering students with MELRs is discussed in line with MOE CE objectives (2007; 2017; 2020), with a focus on CE-relevant learning outcomes.

Recent perspectives in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning suggest that motivation and engagement do not arise automatically from the use of mobile devices or applications. Instead, their effectiveness depends on how learners perceive and act upon mobile affordances within the social and institutional arrangements of learning (Guillén & Sawin, 2025; Guo et al., 2024; Zain & Bowles, 2024). As Ushioda (2013, 2016) notes, motivation in technology-mediated environments arises not from the tools themselves but from how learners interpret, personalise,

and use the affordances those tools make available. Within L2MSS (L2 Motivational Self System), the activation of the Ideal L2 Self can therefore be viewed not only as an individual psychological process but also as one shaped by social and institutional mediation (Henry, 2014). From an Activity Theory (AT) perspective, learner motivation is integral to tool-mediated action, emerging through the ways learners exercise agency amid the rules, norms, and division of labour that structure their classroom practices (Engeström, 2015; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). On this basis, the Ideal L2 Self is treated as the psychological basis of direct personal, proxy, and collective forms of agency—direct personal (self-initiated action), proxy (mobilising others' action), and collective (coordinated group action)—that may or may not lead to sustained engagement with the affordances of MELRs.

Despite these shared concerns with mediation and agency, motivational, activity-theoretical, and affordance-based approaches have often been applied separately in applied linguistics. Research drawing on the L2MSS has primarily explained how future self-images predict persistence and learning effort (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015), while AT-based studies have explored how institutional arrangements and mediating tools shape participation and development (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Studies of mobile affordances, in turn, have focused mainly on the pedagogical features and usability of specific applications or platforms (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018). Yet few accounts consider how motivational self-guides, sociocultural structures, and mobile affordances interact to shape sustained engagement with MELRs—particularly in minority-serving CE programmes, where resource disparities and linguistic diversity make these interactions especially visible. The purpose of this paper is therefore to offer an integrated framework for explaining English learning through MELRs in Chinese CE courses, with particular attention to minority-serving programmes.

An integrated approach is necessary because no single perspective can fully explain sustained MELR engagement in minority-serving CE programmes. L2MSS foregrounds motivational self-guides but offers limited leverage for analysing how CE rules, community expectations, and divisions of labour shape everyday opportunities for MELR use; AT captures these activity-system structures but often leaves the psychological sources of sustained agency under-specified. Agency–affordance perspectives clarify how designed affordances become learner-actualised through action, yet without an explicit account of motivational self-guides and activity-system structures, they can over-attribute engagement to individual choice or tool features.

To address this gap, the paper develops a conceptual framework that integrates L2MSS, AT, and agency–affordance perspectives to explain how ethnic minority EFL learners engage with MELRs under structurally constrained CE classrooms. The paper advances existing accounts by articulating a mechanism of affordance actualisation, specifying how motivational self-guides, activity-system structures, and modes of agency jointly shape how MELR affordances are translated into sustained engagement in minority-serving CE programmes. Rather than reporting empirical findings, it outlines this framework and a set of research and design implications that can be examined in future empirical studies of mobile-assisted English learning. Conceptually, the paper contributes by (a) modelling Ideal L2 Selves as the psychological basis of agency within CE activity system, (b) specifying how different modes

of agency mediate the actualisation of MELR affordances into multidimensional engagement, and (c) foregrounding minority-serving CE programmes as a critical context for theorising mobile English learning in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *College English (CE) in the Chinese Higher Education Context*

College English (CE) has, since the mid-1980s, been a compulsory, foundational programme for non-English majors, centrally guided by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and locally implemented by universities' academic affairs offices (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; MOE, 2007, 2017, 2020). Its stated aim is to develop functional academic literacy and intercultural communication rather than to train language specialists. Successive reforms—from the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR, 2007) to the *Guidelines on College English Teaching* (GCET, 2017, 2020)—retain this orientation while granting institutions greater autonomy in placement, module offerings, and delivery formats. Consistent with MOE guidance (2007; 2017; 2020), the outcome focus adopted in this paper for CE activity system is the development of comprehensive English communicative competence.

Evaluation is dominated by large-scale standardised testing, notably CET-4 and CET-6, which often function as benchmarks for institutional reputation, employability, and student proficiency (Cheng et al., 2013; Shen, 2019). The literature consistently documents negative washback: pedagogy narrows toward test strategies and text-centric skills, with reduced attention to spoken interaction and intercultural outcomes; grammar-translation and memorisation practices often carry over from secondary schooling (Gao, 2009; Han, 2021). Compounding factors include large classes (often 50–60 students), limited opportunities for interaction and feedback, and insufficient preparation for teaching in massified university classrooms (Yang, 2020). These structural conditions are further shaped by tensions between imported communicative methodologies and local classroom realities, which may constrain teachers' ability to foster active participation (Lu & Ares, 2015).

Technology-enhanced CE, including the use of MELRs, has expanded under national initiatives associated with *Education Informatization 2.0*, which outline the motivation, framework, and vision for digitally enabled teaching and learning (Yan & Yang, 2021). While meta-analytic evidence points to generally positive effects of mobile learning on English achievement across diverse settings (Chen, 2022), the implementation of such technologies in CE remains strongly conditioned by assessment regimes. Analyses of the reformed CET-4 suggest that this washback persists, alongside calls for diversified and better-aligned assessment practices (Han, 2021). Empirical studies further show that when test stakes are reduced, learners' strategy use and engagement patterns shift (Gu & Lyu, 2023), indicating that assessment continues to structure behaviour and that lowered stakes do not automatically promote communicative orientations.

In the Chinese higher education system, a number of institutions and programmes explicitly enrol high proportions of ethnic minority students and can be described as minority-serving

(Huang et al., 2025; Xiong & Jacob, 2020). These institutions operate under the same national CE policy frameworks as other universities, but their CE classrooms bring together students whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ in systematic ways from the majority student population. Recent studies suggest that such minority-serving programmes play distinctive roles in shaping students' learning opportunities, identity development, and engagement (Huang et al., 2025; Xiong & Jacob, 2020). These long-standing constraints form the backdrop against which minority-serving CE programmes operate, making them a particularly revealing setting for examining how CE activity-system structures shape the actualisation of MELR affordances.

2.2 L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS)

The L2MSS was proposed to explain second- and foreign-language motivation in classroom-based contexts where direct integration with target-language communities is limited. Moving beyond integrative–instrumental distinctions, it offers a future-oriented account of how imagined L2 futures energise learning behaviour (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Drawing on possible selves theory and self-discrepancy theory, the L2MSS conceptualises future self-guides as L2-specific: they concern the kind of L2 user a person ideally wishes to become and the attributes they believe they should develop to meet external expectations (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

The system comprises three components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The Ideal L2 Self is an elaborated, personally owned image of oneself as a successful L2 user that can sustain long-term effort. The Ought-to L2 Self captures externally anchored attributes one feels obliged to develop to satisfy social or institutional expectations (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The L2 Learning Experience encompasses situated motives arising from the immediate learning environment—teachers, curriculum, materials, peer group, classroom climate, and patterns of success and failure—thus linking imagined futures to ongoing classroom activity (Dörnyei, 2019). Together, these components integrate aspirational and situated dimensions of L2 motivation and have been shown to predict individual differences in effort and persistence across a range of EFL settings (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015; Yousefi & Mahmoodi, 2022).

Within this framework, the **Ideal L2 Self** is consistently the strongest predictor of motivated learning behaviour and sustained engagement (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Safdari, 2021). Dynamic perspectives on possible selves further suggest that such future images are not static traits but part of a working self-concept that is continually shaped by interaction with contexts, feedback, and significant others (Al-Murtadha, 2025). Mercer's work on learner agency and self-concept likewise portrays learners' self-beliefs as central resources for agentic action rather than passive reflections of past achievement (Mercer, 2012). Building on these insights, the present framework treats the Ideal L2 Self as the psychological basis of agency within an activity system. It provides personally meaningful reasons for caring about English, frames what counts as a worthwhile learning opportunity, and underpins learners' readiness to pursue, resist, or reshape opportunities for mobile English learning in response to structural tensions around assessment, curriculum, and classroom norms. The Ought-to L2 Self may be

salient in high-stakes CE contexts, but the framework foregrounds the Ideal L2 Self because the model centres on agentic engagement with MELRs.

A central mechanism in the L2MSS is **vision**: a vivid, imagery-rich representation of a desired L2 future that is internalised as one's own and experienced with the "felt reality" of goal attainment (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). In technology-rich environments, mobile tools can supply abundant input and opportunities for interaction, but these possibilities become motivationally meaningful only when learners perceive them as steps towards envisaged L2 futures. In other words, the strength and content of learners' Ideal L2 Selves influence which mobile affordances are noticed, valued, and ultimately actualised through action.

Recent work has argued that the L2 Learning Experience is closely linked to learners' ongoing engagement with classroom tasks (Dörnyei, 2019). Engagement is commonly conceptualised as a multidimensional process that includes behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects of participation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). In this paper, engagement is not treated as a separate theoretical system but as a way of modelling how the L2 Learning Experience is realised in everyday activity. Behavioural engagement refers to observable participation and persistence; cognitive engagement reflects strategic regulation and deeper processing; emotional engagement denotes affective involvement such as interest, enjoyment, or anxiety.

In the conceptual framework developed below, behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement represent the proximal form that direct personal, proxy, and collective agency takes when learners interact with MELRs along the Subject–Object pathway of an activity system. This link allows the framework to explain when and how motivational self-guides make mobile affordances motivationally powerful: the Ideal L2 Self is modelled as the psychological basis of agency, while the L2 Learning Experience is modelled through multidimensional engagement, thereby keeping the focus on agentic engagement with MELRs rather than on an exhaustive set of motivational variables.

2.3 Activity Theory in MALL

Originating in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, AT provides a human-practice-based framework for analysing learning as an object-oriented, tool-mediated, and socially situated activity. Engeström (2001) further elaborated this tradition by representing human activity as a mediated system in which individual and contextual factors continually interact. Rather than functioning as a predictive theory, AT serves as a descriptive meta-framework for examining human praxis as a developmental process at both the individual and collective levels (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). This perspective assumes that human activity cannot be understood apart from its historical, cultural, and institutional context (Arnseth, 2008).

Within Engeström's (2001) triangular model, an activity system comprises six interrelated components: the subject, object, mediating tools (artifacts), rules, community, and division of labour, which together generate observable outcomes (see Figure 1). The model emphasises that these components influence one another through ongoing mediation and transformation. AT thus provides a systematic lens for examining how learners' engagement with MELRs emerges from, and is constrained by, the interplay among pedagogical norms, institutional

structures, and sociocultural conditions (Engeström, 1999; Levy & Stockwell, 2013; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

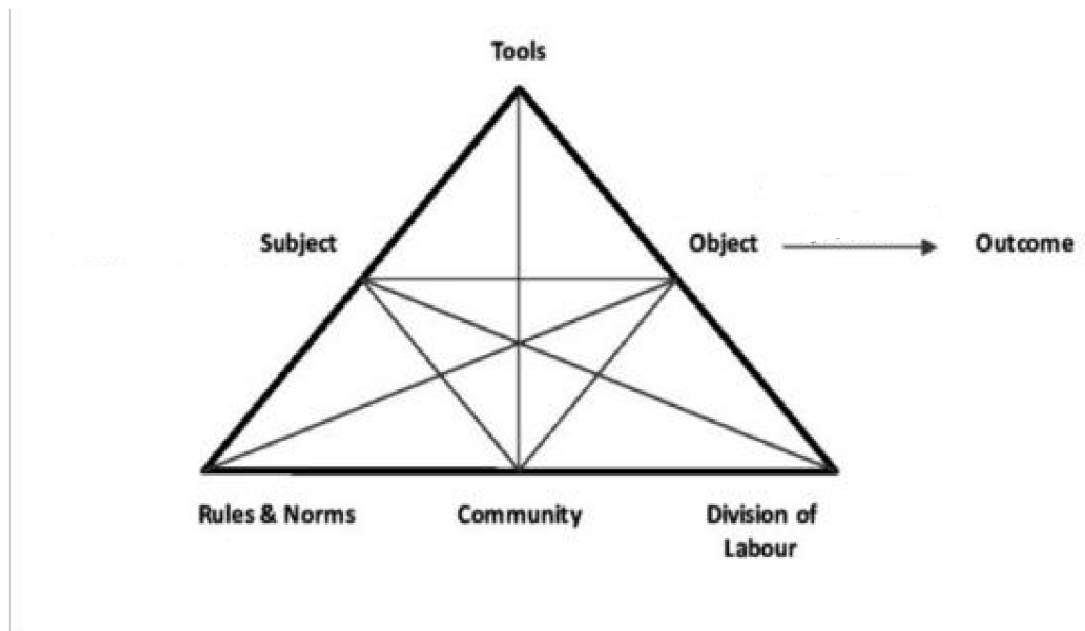


Figure 1. Activity system model adapted from Engeström (2001)

A key tenet of AT is that activity systems are inherently dynamic and often marked by tensions and contradictions, which serve as catalysts for change and innovation (Engeström, 2001; Yamagata-Lynch, 2003). In MALL environments, for example, contradictions can arise from misalignments between pedagogical goals and technological affordances, or between teacher expertise and students' self-regulatory capacities. Although such tensions may initially hinder the effective integration of technology, they can also promote expansive learning and pedagogical transformation when systematically identified and addressed (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). For instance, institutional constraints, limited digital literacy, or inadequate teacher training may restrict students' ability to utilise MELRs effectively; through reflective cycles and systemic adjustments, these obstacles can evolve into opportunities for innovation and sustainable engagement (Sharples et al., 2005).

Building on this view, applying AT to MALL shifts attention from technological access per se to the *design levers* within the activity system. These include aligning tools with pedagogical tasks, establishing explicit and feasible classroom and out-of-class device policies, fostering peer and teacher support networks within the learning community, and scaffolding a gradual transition from teacher-directed to self-regulated learning (Levy & Stockwell, 2013; Stockwell, 2022). Such design principles are particularly salient for minority-serving CE programmes, where technological participation is often intermittent despite high device accessibility.

2.4 Agency and Affordances in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

The concept of affordance is foundational to accounts of second and foreign language learning. Originating in Gibson's (1979) account of affordances as opportunities for action, the notion has been reinterpreted for language learning as "possibilities for action that yield opportunities for engagement and participation" (van Lier, 2004, p. 81). In educational contexts, affordances involve both tool properties and users' situated perceptions and actions (Xue & Churchill, 2019; Tong et al., 2024). Recent MALL work distinguishes between designed affordances built into digital tools and learner-actualised affordances that are perceived, realised, and sometimes reshaped through use (Tong et al., 2024). This distinction is critical because the designed affordances of mobile devices—portability, multimodality, notifications, communication channels—become pedagogically and motivationally meaningful only when they are actualised within concrete instructional and sociocultural arrangements (Stockwell, 2022).

Agency helps explain why similar designed affordances are actualised differently across learners and settings. Bandura (2001) distinguishes direct personal, proxy, and collective modes of agency that map onto typical MALL participation patterns. Learners who self-initiate mobile study—seeking apps, resources, social groups, or practice opportunities—exemplify direct personal agency, often with stronger self-regulation and clearer goals (Demouy et al., 2015). Many classroom learners operate through proxy agency, where others' support (e.g., teachers' task design, guidance, and learner training) structures technology-enabled activities; without such supports, engagement often remains limited (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Collective agency is evident when coordinated arrangements—peer practices, group norms, or broader sociocultural conditions—shape participation and outcomes (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

Empirical MALL studies illustrate variability in affordance actualisation and underscore the role of agency. Learners differ in how they perceive and engage with opportunities for meaning-making, collaboration, and self-monitoring on mobile or social platforms (Ahn, 2016). In WeChat-supported environments, research identifies multiple affordances for casual interaction, authentic communication, resource access, and identity work, yet whether these affordances are actualised in practice depends on learners' proficiency, goals, and perceived relevance; teacher-intended affordances may not be actualised or be re-mediated by learners (Tong et al., 2024). When teachers provide explicit strategy training, just-in-time support, and structured feedback channels, mobile-based tasks tend to elicit higher engagement and measurable learning gains; in contrast, generic invitations to "use an app" often remain unactualised (Stockwell, 2022). The literature thus points to common affordances and enduring constraints, highlighting the continued need for deliberate coordination of tasks, tools, and support (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018).

In this paper, agency–affordance perspectives are used to explain how the designed affordances of MELRs are actualised, or left unactualised, through direct personal, proxy, and collective agency within particular CE activity systems. Building on the L2MSS account, the framework assumes that these modes of agency are energised by learners' Ideal L2 Selves and shaped by their L2 Learning Experiences, modelled here through multidimensional engagement.

3. Conceptual Framework

Building on the above literature, this section presents a conceptual framework for empowering ethnic minority students' mobile English learning in CE courses in China. The framework integrates the L2MSS, AT, and agency–affordance perspectives to explain how MELR affordances are actualised through direct personal, proxy, and collective agency within a CE activity system in minority-serving CE programmes. In the framework, L2MSS specifies the motivational self-guides and engagement constructs, AT provides the activity-system structure, and agency–affordance perspectives explain how designed affordances become learner-actualised through different modes of agency. Figure 2 summarises these relationships. In the diagram, ethnic minority learners occupy the Subject node, MELRs are positioned at the Tools node, and three arrows towards the Object represent direct personal, proxy, and collective agency as distinct but interrelated pathways through which MELR affordances are translated into behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

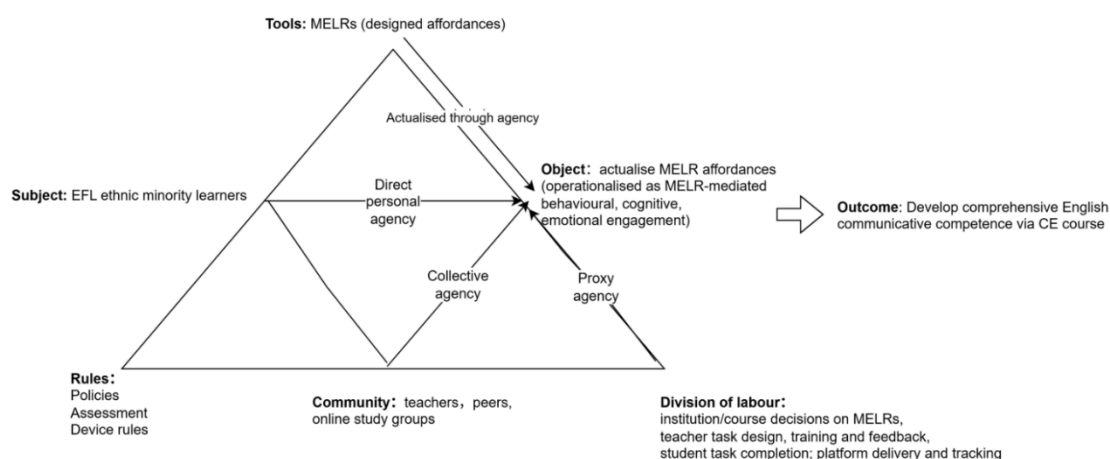


Figure 2. L2 motivational self- and activity theory-informed conceptual framework

In the framework, MELRs are treated as tools with designed affordances that become learner-actualised only through agency under specific activity-system structures. The following subsections specify how this logic applies to each node and pathway.

3.1 Subject Node: Ethnic minority EFL Learners

Within the model, ethnic minority EFL learners form the Subject node. Learners bring diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds into CE classrooms, and orient to English learning in ways that reflect their prior experiences and local circumstances. The Ideal L2 Self is located within this node as a personally meaningful sense of who one might become in academic, professional, or community domains, which orients learners' use of MELRs within the activity system. L2 vision is understood here as the imagery-based process that makes this Ideal L2 Self vivid and experientially real. **The Ideal L2 Self does not on its own guarantee**

engagement; its activation depends on whether learners perceive viable pathways for action within the surrounding activity system.

3.2 Tools Node: Mobile English Learning Resources

MELRs occupy the Tools node. They provide designed affordances such as access to multimodal input, practice tasks, progress dashboards, and reminders. These possibilities do not automatically yield meaningful learning opportunities. They become learner-actualised affordances only when learners (a) recognise them, (b) interpret them as relevant to their English learning and imagined futures, and (c) are able to make use of them within the constraints and possibilities of the CE activity system.

3.3 Agency Pathways: Direct Personal, Proxy, and Collective Agency

Agency mediates how different parts of the activity system connect to MELR-mediated engagement and is represented through three dynamically related forms. Direct personal agency refers to learners' self-initiated MELR use that aligns with their Ideal L2 Selves, for instance choosing to undertake additional listening or speaking practice on mobile devices or adapting apps for personally valued goals. Proxy agency arises when institutional or instructional structures organise and scaffold participation: CE programmes specify MELR-based requirements; teachers select platforms, design tasks, provide training, and set timelines; platforms deliver prompts and track completion. Collective agency emerges from shared classroom and peer practices that normalise and sustain MELR use, including collaborative completion of mobile tasks, peer tutoring in groups, and mutual support in online study spaces. These forms of agency are conceptualised not as stable learner types but as relational processes that develop in response to, and sometimes modify, existing structural conditions.

3.4 Contextual Nodes: Rules, Community, and Division of Labour

The three contextual nodes at the base of the activity system—Rules, Community, and Division of Labour—specify the structural environment in which agency operates. Rules include institutional policies, assessment regimes, and formal or informal regulations governing device use and participation, which delineate when and how MELRs may legitimately be used in CE. Community comprises teachers, classmates, and online study networks whose practices and expectations model particular ways of using mobile resources. Division of Labour captures how responsibilities for structuring, supporting, and monitoring MELR use are distributed: institutions select platforms and set overall requirements; teachers design and sequence tasks and provide feedback; students manage their own participation; platforms supply content and basic analytics.

3.5 Object Node: MELR-mediated Engagement

The Object of the activity system is defined as the actualisation of MELR affordances for learning, represented as MELR-mediated behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, as outlined in Section 2.2. This tri-dimensional construct represents the proximal manifestation of how agency, motivational self-guides, and the structural environment converge in learners' moment-to-moment interactions with MELRs.

3.6 Outcome Node: College English Communicative Competence

The Outcome node represents the development of comprehensive English communicative competence through participation in College English courses. In the CE context, relevant outcomes include gains in comprehensive communicative competence, encompassing academic literacy and intercultural skills; changes in learners' confidence and willingness to communicate; evolving senses of legitimacy as English-mediated participants; and access to academic and professional opportunities. By distinguishing Object-level engagement from Outcome-level trajectories, the model highlights how coordinated action among institutions, teachers, students, and technological tools is required if MELRs are to support the broader goals of CE curricula rather than simply reproducing existing exam-driven practices.

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1 Research Implications

The framework is organised around the proposition that MELR affordances become motivationally powerful only when they are actualised through direct personal, proxy, and collective agency within the CE activity system. By locating MELR-mediated behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement at the Object node, the framework directs research away from counting tool use and towards examining how different forms of agency turn available affordances into sustained engagement under particular rules, communities, and division of labour. This helps to reduce the fragmentation in existing work, where L2MSS studies often focus on psychological variables, AT studies emphasise structures and tools, and MALL studies foreground technological features without fully connecting these strands.

In relation to the L2MSS, the framework models the Ideal L2 Self as a psychological basis for agency rather than as a fixed individual trait. Dynamic perspectives on possible selves suggest that future self-images are formed and reshaped through interaction with learning environments, feedback, and significant others, and that vision-oriented interventions can strengthen motivated behaviour over time (Henry, 2014; Safdari, 2021). Within the CE activity system, MELR-supported tasks, assessment signals, and classroom practices can therefore support learners in developing L2 vision, building more vivid, personally owned images of themselves as capable English users, or leave such images weak and poorly connected to daily study. Future research can examine how rules, task designs, and forms of support in CE courses shape opportunities for learners to develop and activate their Ideal L2 Selves in everyday study, and how adjustments to these course conditions are mirrored in changes in learners' motivation and engagement over time. Conceptually, this reframes the L2MSS by modelling Ideal L2 Selves as the psychological basis of agency within the activity system and treating the L2 Learning Experience as the situated realisation of agency in learners' engagement, rather than as a purely intra-individual construct.

From an AT perspective, the framework clarifies how agency links structural conditions to engagement. Direct personal, proxy, and collective agency describe different ways in which learners' actions are shaped by and respond to the CE activity system. For example, a learner

may begin by relying mainly on proxy agency when MELR tasks are tightly specified and monitored by teachers, gradually develop direct personal agency by adding self-initiated listening or speaking practice, and experience stronger collective agency when peers form regular mobile study groups. Conversely, shifts in rules or classroom norms—such as reduced feedback or negative peer attitudes towards mobile tasks—may push participation back towards minimal, compliance-driven forms. Longitudinal and multiple-case designs can use this lens to trace how agency moves across modes as tensions in the activity system are handled or left unresolved, and to identify which combinations of rules, community norms, and division of labour make it easier or harder for learners to sustain engagement with MELRs (**Engeström, 2001; Yamagata-Lynch, 2003, 2010; Mercer, 2012**).

The framework also treats the characteristics of minority-serving CE programmes, including students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as contextual conditions that shape how affordances are perceived and used, rather than as separate constructs. Institutional histories, classroom norms, and community attitudes toward English and other languages can influence whether MELR-based opportunities are seen as realistic, valuable, and safe to pursue (Jiang et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). In such programmes, these conditions can intensify or dampen the effects of direct personal, proxy, and collective agency on engagement. Minority-serving CE classrooms therefore offer a context in which the interaction of self-guides, agency, and activity-system structures is especially visible, but the framework is not limited to these settings. Comparative studies across minority-serving and non-minority-serving programmes could use the framework to explore how different institutional and sociocultural conditions shape the space for meaningful mobile English learning.

Within MALL research more broadly, the framework offers a way to interpret recurring patterns such as early enthusiasm followed by decline, concentration on vocabulary drills, or positive attitudes combined with weak behavioural engagement (Stockwell, 2013, 2022; Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018; Zhang & Pérez-Paredes, 2019; Shen et al., 2023). In terms of the framework, these are cases where designed affordances remain only partly used because proxy support is restricted to basic monitoring, collective norms position MELR tasks as peripheral, or assessment rules signal that other activities matter more. Future research can move beyond describing such outcomes by analysing how specific combinations of rules, community practices, and division of labour make it easier or harder for learners to turn mobile access into sustained behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, and by testing interventions that adjust these conditions.

At the same time, the framework has limits that point to further research needs. It is a conceptual framework that requires empirical examination, including work that tests its assumptions about how agency, self-images, and structural conditions combine to shape engagement. Some processes, such as the development of Ideal L2 Selves or the growth of collective agency around MELR use, are likely to require longitudinal or ethnographic designs to capture in detail. The framework has been developed with reference to Chinese CE contexts and minority-serving programmes, so studies in other higher-education settings will need to consider how differences in policy, curriculum, and technological provision may affect its applicability. In addition, the framework is not designed to predict specific language-learning

outcomes; rather, it offers a structured account of how motivational and structural processes intersect in CE courses that integrate MELRs.

4.2 Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

The framework also has implications for how MELRs are designed and used in CE classrooms. Viewing CE as an activity system highlights that agency, affordances, and structural conditions need to be aligned: access to tools or positive attitudes alone will not support sustained engagement if rules, community norms, and division of labour do not allow learners to use MELRs in meaningful ways or to actualise their affordances.

Within the *Subject* node, teaching can support learners in **forming and elaborating Ideal L2 Selves through vision-based activities** that link self-images to concrete, realistic pathways in which English and mobile resources play a role. Classroom projects can invite students to use MELRs to explore academic disciplines, professional routes, or community roles where English is combined with local languages, so that mobile activity becomes a **meaningful step toward learners' envisioned futures** rather than isolated drill work (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Clear explanations of how MELR tasks relate to assessment and course goals can help students view these tasks as integral to the core work of CE rather than optional add-ons. In this way, MELR-supported experiences can contribute both to the **construction and activation of learners' Ideal L2 Selves**, increasing the likelihood that designed affordances are experienced as relevant and worth sustained engagement.

At the levels of Community and Division of Labour, the framework points to the need for scaffolded and socially embedded MELR activities that support direct personal, proxy, and collective forms of agency (Bandura, 2001; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Teachers can provide explicit guidance on how to choose and use apps strategically, design collaborative mobile tasks, and organise peer support so that collective norms favour regular, purposeful mobile use (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Tong et al., 2024). Activities that leave space for learner-initiated uses of MELRs, such as student-suggested tasks or peer-led online study groups, can help learners practise direct personal agency while benefiting from proxy and collective supports (Ahn, 2016; Demouy et al., 2015). For ethnic minority students, meaningful mobile activities can enhance their investment in English learning when these tasks allow them to connect English with their own cultural resources, experiences, and communicative goals. Studies show that when learners use digital tools to create personally meaningful content—such as multimodal projects linking English expression to local knowledge and identities—they experience a stronger sense of ownership and agency in language learning (Jiang et al, 2020). At an institutional level, minority-serving programmes that integrate cultural relevance and linguistic support within broader community structures are more likely to sustain engagement and academic development (Xiong & Jacob, 2020). Such connections can transform English learning from a requirement into a resource for participation in wider academic and social communities.

At the level of Rules and institutional arrangements, the sustainability of mobile English learning depends on how institutional policies shape learners' opportunities to actualise MELR affordances through different forms of agency. When assessment policies acknowledge

process-oriented mobile engagement—for example, reflective app-based tasks or ongoing participation in mobile discussions—they legitimise teachers’ efforts to scaffold proxy agency and reduce test-driven, superficial uses of technology (Han, 2021). Reliable and inclusive platform design ensures that students with varied devices and connectivity can exercise direct personal agency by managing their own mobile learning routines (Zhang & Pérez-Paredes, 2019; Shen et al., 2023; Chen, 2022). Moreover, teacher professional development that links learning analytics with this framework’s conceptualisation of agency helps educators identify where institutional rules or task designs are constraining collective agency rather than motivating participation (Stockwell, 2013, 2022; Xue & Churchill, 2019). Such system-level coordination enables learners to transform mobile access into sustained behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, making the institutional dimension a key driver of motivationally powerful MELR use. Taken together, these pedagogical and institutional levers can expand students’ scope for meaningful choice, voice, and collaboration in mobile English learning, thereby advancing a more empowering form of College English education in minority-serving programmes.

5. Conclusion

This paper has proposed an integrated conceptual framework that brings together the L2MSS, AT, and agency–affordance perspectives to conceptualise how MELRs are actualised within the CE activity system in minority-serving programmes in China. The framework starts from the proposition that MELRs become motivationally powerful only when their affordances are actualised through direct personal, proxy, and collective agency within this system. It treats MELR-mediated behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement as the proximal process of affordance actualisation. Through this process, developing Ideal L2 Selves, different forms of agency, and activity-system structures—rules, community, and division of labour—converge in everyday English learning.

The L2MSS is used to model Ideal L2 Selves as the psychological basis of agency and to interpret the L2 Learning Experience through multidimensional engagement, while Activity Theory provides the activity-system structure in which agency operates. Agency–affordance perspectives highlight how designed mobile affordances become learner-actualised only under particular pedagogical and institutional arrangements, especially in minority-serving CE programmes. The framework is intended as an analytical lens for examining these interrelations and for informing the design and interpretation of future empirical studies and pedagogical initiatives, rather than as a predictive model of specific language-learning outcomes. Further research is needed to examine how the proposed relationships play out in practice across diverse CE contexts.

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