

SHAPING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SKILLS: ENGLISH LEARNING PRACTICES IN ROMANIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Elena MEȘTEREAGĂ

Nicolaus Olahus Technological High School, Orăștie, Romania

Daniel DEJICA

Politehnica University Timisoara, Romania

Abstract: *This study explores the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Romanian secondary school students. It highlights how personal English learning ecologies foster skill development, self-confidence, and the shaping of social identity. Data from 143 learners aged 12–15, collected via questionnaires, learner diaries, and open-ended responses, reveal that OOCs provide spaces for diverse self-directed activities, such as engaging with English-language media, reading, and communicating with peers. These activities enhance language skills and confidence, while interactions within personal communities of practice support learners’ progress through scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The study emphasizes the complementarity of classroom instruction and OOCs, advocating for supportive environments to bridge these contexts. The findings offer valuable insights for EFL educators and policymakers, highlighting OOCs as transformative spaces for linguistic and social development.*

Keywords: *out-of-class contexts (OOCs); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); personal learning ecologies; social identity; secondary school learners*

1. Introduction

The dynamic interplay between formal classroom instruction and out-of-class contexts (OOCs) has emerged as a critical area of investigation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education (Benson 15-31; Sundqvist 480). In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in English is no longer limited to academic success but has become a cornerstone for global communication, cultural exchange, and professional opportunities (Gardner 50-70). Understanding how learners engage with English beyond the classroom sheds light on the unique and meaningful contributions of their personal English learning ecologies to language acquisition and skill development (Barron 193).

Building on prior research, this study offers a fresh perspective by extending the analysis presented in *The Role of Out-of-Class Contexts in EFL Learning* (Meștereagă 240-260), which explored the general dynamics of OOCs in fostering language development. It further complements existing studies in the field, including the recent examination of high school learners’

perspectives (Meștereagă and Dejica 229-240), offering insights into secondary school learners' unique experiences and practices. This research centers on Romanian secondary school EFL learners, exploring how they actively integrate English into their daily lives through diverse activities in OOCs. By examining learners' motivations, practices, and perceptions, the study seeks to uncover the role of OOCs in fostering linguistic growth, enhancing self-confidence, and shaping social identities as English users (Norton 5-7; Wardhaugh and Fuller 249-252). The analysis also considers the impact of personal communities of practice and interpersonal spaces, where learners engage in authentic interactions that scaffold their learning (Vygotsky 84-91; Lantolf and Thorne 263-270).

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to examine the ways in which secondary school learners use English in OOCs and how these experiences influence their language skills across reading, writing, listening, and speaking; second, to understand the social and psychological dimensions of language learning, particularly the development of learners' social identity and self-expression through English. The findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers, emphasizing the importance of creating supportive environments that bridge formal instruction with real-world language use.

By positioning learners' perspectives at the forefront, this research highlights the transformative potential of OOCs in making English a relevant and accessible tool for personal growth, academic achievement, and future success.

2. Frameworks for Understanding Language Ecologies

This study draws upon the intersection of sociocultural theory, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 84-91), and the construct of personal English learning ecologies (Cabot 94-98) to examine the language development of Romanian secondary school learners. These theoretical approaches provide a holistic lens for examining the intricate processes driving language acquisition in out-of-class contexts (OOCs).

Rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, language learning is viewed as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction and collaboration. Learners acquire language by engaging with more knowledgeable peers, adults, or resources within their cultural and social environments (Vygotsky 84-91). This perspective underscores the importance of personal communities of practice, where learners actively participate in shared activities and negotiate meaning (Wardhaugh and Fuller 249-252). The interaction within these communities is instrumental in scaffolding learners' knowledge and advancing their proficiency.

The ZPD provides a framework for understanding how secondary school learners progress from their current level of competence to higher levels of ability with the support of scaffolding. Within their interpersonal spaces, learners receive assistance, feedback, or explanations from peers, family members, or even digital resources, enabling them to navigate linguistic challenges. The supportive interactions in these zones allow learners to bridge the gap between what they can accomplish independently and what they can achieve through collaboration (Lantolf and Thorne 263-287). This dynamic plays a crucial role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, communication confidence, and skill development.

This research adopts the concept of learning ecologies (Barron 193) to frame the multifaceted ways learners engage with English in OOCs. A personal English learning ecology encompasses the diverse environments, resources, and social interactions that facilitate language acquisition beyond the classroom. For secondary school learners, these ecologies are shaped by their personal interests, digital engagement, and social networks, providing both input (listening and reading) and output (writing and speaking) opportunities. The dynamic nature of these ecologies enables learners to integrate English seamlessly into their daily lives, fostering both linguistic and social identity development.

Finally, the study incorporates social identity theory to examine how learners' interactions in English contribute to their evolving sense of self as language users. According to Norton (5-7), identity is constructed and reconstructed through participation in social interactions and communities. Experiences in OOCs enable learners to negotiate their identity as confident English users, often transforming the language from an academic subject to an intrinsic part of their self-expression.

3. Literature Review

Out-of-class learning has been widely recognized as an integral complement to classroom instruction. Benson (90-92) highlights how autonomous language learning in OOCs provides opportunities for learners to engage with authentic input and apply their skills in real-world situations. Studies have shown that activities such as watching English-language media, reading online articles, and interacting with peers in English significantly enhance vocabulary, comprehension, and cultural understanding (Sundqvist 193-198). The integration of English into leisure and practical activities fosters intrinsic motivation and reinforces learners' commitment to language mastery.

The advent of digital platforms and social media has transformed OOCs into highly dynamic learning environments. Research by Sockett (63-112) underscores the role of digital media in facilitating informal language acquisition, particularly through activities like streaming videos, gaming, and

social networking. Recent research also emphasizes the role of social presence in enhancing learner engagement in digital environments. Wu (1-14) found that online learning self-efficacy and informal digital learning of English significantly influence student engagement, particularly when mediated by social presence. In the same vein, Guan, Zhang, and Gu (1-17) explored how generative AI tools are reshaping informal digital learning of English. Their findings, grounded in social cognitive theory, highlight how learners use AI to personalize their learning experiences and enhance language acquisition through self-regulated strategies. Such platforms and tools provide learners with access to diverse language inputs and opportunities for interaction with native and non-native speakers. For Romanian secondary school learners, these digital tools represent a vital aspect of their learning ecologies, allowing them to practice English in meaningful and engaging ways.

Barron's (195-200) exploration of learning ecologies underscores the learner's agency in constructing a personalized network of resources and opportunities. Personal learning ecologies enable learners to take charge of their education by aligning their interests with their linguistic goals. This aligns with the findings of Lai and Gu (319-325), who emphasize the importance of self-directed learning in fostering deeper engagement with the target language. For secondary school learners, the ability to curate their personal ecologies through activities like online reading, communication, and creative writing is instrumental in their progress.

Learners' motivation plays a pivotal role in shaping their approach to OOCs. Gardner's (109-112) distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation sheds light on the reasons learners engage with English. While some are driven by professional aspirations, others are motivated by the desire to connect with diverse cultures and communities. Additionally, Norton's (5-7) work on identity highlights how learners' engagement in OOCs contributes to their development as confident English speakers. By participating in social interactions, learners negotiate and solidify their sense of self in relation to the target language, as observed in the Romanian learners in this study.

While OOCs offer rich learning opportunities, they also present challenges. Studies suggest that learners may encounter difficulties in managing their time, accessing appropriate resources, or overcoming anxiety in social interactions (Sokkett 63-112). For Romanian secondary school learners, the support of interpersonal spaces and communities of practice is crucial in addressing these challenges, providing scaffolding that fosters confidence and skill acquisition.

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Romanian secondary school learners. By combining quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from learner diaries and open-ended responses, the methodology ensures a comprehensive exploration of learners' practices, motivations, and perceptions (Benson 215-226; Creswell and Plano Clark 1-19).

The research focuses on two primary objectives: identifying and analyzing the activities through which secondary school learners engage with English in out-of-class contexts (OOCs), and assessing how these practices contribute to their language proficiency, self-confidence, and social identity as English users. To achieve these aims, the study utilizes a combination of data collection tools and processes. Quantitative data is gathered through questionnaires, which explore learners' frequency of English use, preferred activities, and self-perceived proficiency across reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Qualitative insights are obtained from learner diaries, offering detailed accounts of their daily engagement with English, including motivations, challenges, and emotional responses (Socket 31-62). Additionally, open-ended questions are incorporated into the questionnaires, allowing learners to elaborate on their perceptions of English use in OOCs and the impact of these experiences on their learning journey.

The study involved a sample of 143 secondary school learners from four Romanian schools—coded A, B, C, and D—who were divided into two groups. Group 1 consisted of 99 learners from schools A, B, and C, aged between 12 and 15, while Group 2 included 44 learners from school D, aged between 13 and 15. The participants displayed diverse characteristics in terms of gender, educational backgrounds, familial contexts, and levels of English proficiency. This diversity provided a rich foundation for analyzing the intersection of personal English learning ecologies with learners' demographic and sociocultural factors (Barron 195-200).

The study employed a variety of data collection instruments to capture the complexities of secondary school learners' engagement with English in out-of-class contexts (OOCs). Questionnaires were distributed to all participants to gather quantitative data on their frequency of English use, preferred activities, and self-assessed proficiency across different language skills. These included a mix of Likert-scale items (Allen and Seaman 64-65), ranking tasks, and open-ended prompts designed to explore learners' motivations and perceptions of skill development. Learner diaries provided additional qualitative insights, documenting detailed accounts of daily interactions with English, such as the type and purpose of activities, along with any newly acquired skills or vocabulary. Furthermore, open-ended questions

in the questionnaires allowed learners to elaborate on their personal experiences, adding depth and context to the quantitative findings.

The analysis employed a combination of statistical techniques for quantitative data and thematic coding for qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Quantitative analysis utilized statistical methods, including correlation analysis, e.g., Pearson correlation (240-242), to investigate relationships between variables such as frequency of English use and skill development. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages, means, and medians, were also employed to illustrate trends in learners' preferences and activities. For qualitative data, a thematic analysis was conducted on diary entries and open-ended responses following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (87). Inductive coding was used to uncover recurring patterns, themes, and insights, shedding light on learners' motivations, emotional responses, and perceived improvements across the four language skills.

The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Informed consent was obtained from learners and their guardians, and data collection procedures were meticulously designed to ensure participants' privacy and comfort (Creswell and Creswell 88-91).

Certain limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective biases, reflecting learners' perceptions rather than objective measures of proficiency. Additionally, variability in diary entries posed challenges, as some participants provided more detailed accounts than others. Lastly, the focus on Romanian secondary school learners restricts the generalizability of findings to broader contexts. Despite these constraints, the study's mixed-methods approach offers a robust framework for exploring the complex interplay between OOCs and EFL learning, yielding valuable insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers.

5. Results

The results reveal the multifaceted experiences and practices of Romanian secondary school EFL learners and offer a comprehensive analysis of how out-of-class contexts (OOCs) shape their language development, social identity, and personal growth. Beginning with the demographic context and foundational EFL practices, the findings highlight learners' motivations, preferences, and the frequency of English use in diverse activities. The section examines learners' perceptions of language use within and beyond classrooms, revealing how low-pressure environments like OOCs encourage fluency, confidence, and authentic communication. Exploring personal English ecologies, the results underscore the synergy between receptive and productive skills, as well as the transformative impact of these practices on

learners' linguistic competence and identity formation. Additionally, the role of social bonds and communities of practice in fostering English proficiency is analyzed, culminating in an exploration of learners' proactive engagement and resourcefulness as agents of their own growth. Together, these findings present a vivid portrait of the interconnected dynamics driving EFL success among Romanian secondary school learners.

5.1. Demographic Context and EFL Practices Among Romanian Secondary School Learners

Gender distribution highlighted a higher proportion of female learners in Group 1 (61.6%) and male learners in Group 2 (59.1%), providing demographic context (Figure 1).

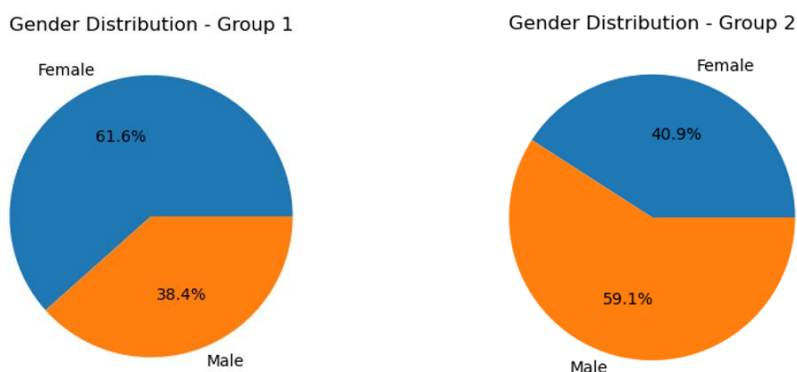


Figure 1 Gender distribution

A stark contrast emerged between the groups regarding parental education and occupation (Figure 2). In Group 1, most fathers held high school diplomas (58.6%) and mothers similarly held high school diplomas (49%). Conversely, Group 2 parents exhibited higher education levels, with 47.7% of fathers and 52.3% of mothers holding university degrees. The disparity extended to occupations: physical labor dominated in Group 1 (fathers 56.1%, mothers 44.4%), while intellectual professions were prevalent in Group 2 (fathers 65.9%, mothers 72.7%). The demographic differences between Group 1 and Group 2 suggest that socioeconomic status may influence learners' access to OOCs. Learners from families with higher educational and occupational backgrounds (Group 2) reported more frequent engagement with diverse English-language resources, such as project work and global affairs reading. This disparity highlights the role of socioeconomic capital in shaping learners' exposure to and participation in informal English learning environments.

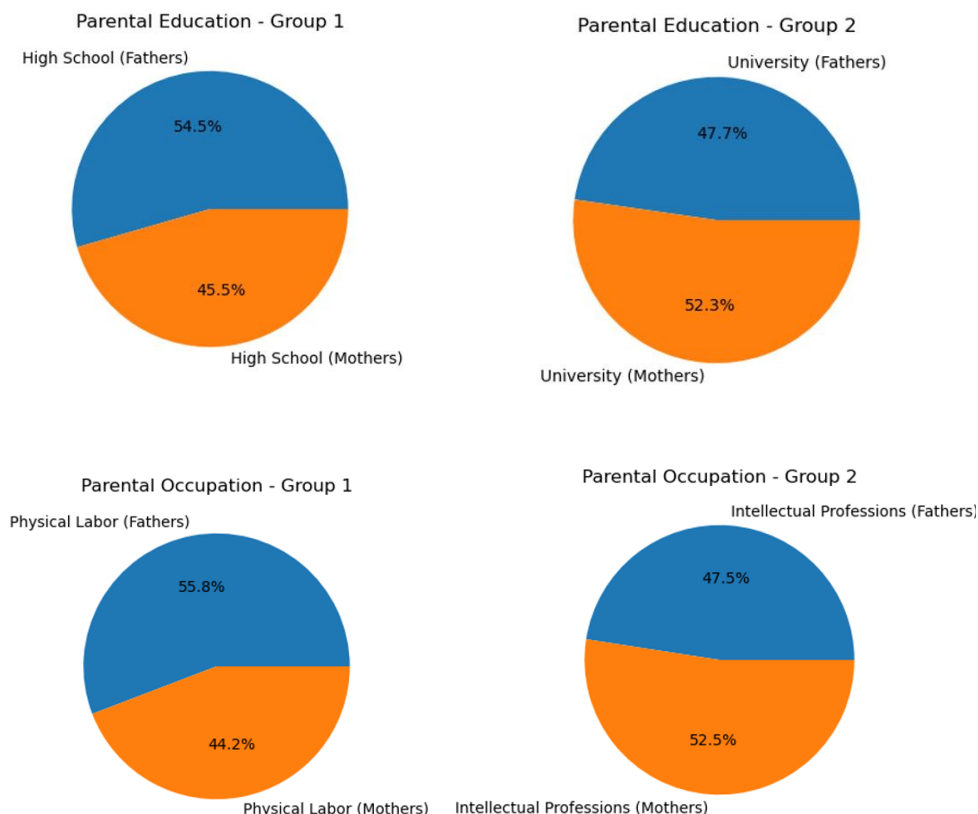


Figure 2 Parental education

Despite similar age ranges, learners' years of English study varied. Group 1 students predominantly reported six years of study (51.5%), while Group 2 had a greater share with seven (45.5%) and eight years (29.5%) of study.

Most learners in Group 1 rated their English proficiency as "good" (43.2%) or "very good" (40.9%), supported by teacher feedback on their progress. One student noted, "I used English rarely, but now I use it often." Both groups actively used English beyond classroom settings: 48.5% of Group 1 and 47.7% of Group 2 strongly disagreed with limiting English use to classes and homework. These patterns reflect a dynamic integration of English into their daily lives.

5.2. Motivations and Frequency of English Use in OOCs

Most secondary school learners rejected the notion that they study English solely to pass exams (50.5% in Group 1, 47.7% in Group 2 strongly disagreed). Only seven students indicated this as their main motivation. More than half of

learners in both groups used English daily outside classroom settings, excluding homework. Weekly use was less frequent, reported by 10.1% of Group 1 and 15.9% of Group 2, with rare usage accounting for 13.1% and 11.4%, respectively (Figure 3).

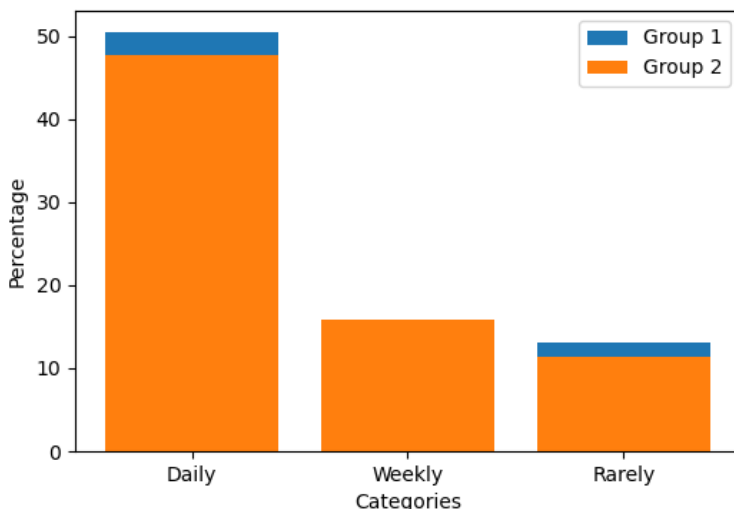


Figure 3 Frequency of English use

The Pearson correlation indicates a strong pattern of regular English use in OOCs. Specifically, the Pearson correlation coefficient for the relationship between the frequency of English use and skill development is 0.991, with a p-value of 0.000. This indicates a strong positive correlation, suggesting that more frequent use of English in out-of-class contexts (OOCs) is associated with greater skill development. These findings highlight the importance of encouraging regular English use beyond the classroom to enhance learners' language proficiency and overall skill growth.

Romanian EFL learners widely acknowledged English as essential for their futures, with 78.8% of Group 1 and 79.5% of Group 2 strongly agreeing on its importance. Aspirations tied to English learning included studying abroad (56.8% in Group 2, 34.3% in Group 1 strongly agreed) and careers in international companies (46.5% in Group 1, 54.5% in Group 2 strongly agreed). These findings underscore English's role in shaping learners' ambitions and its integration into their daily lives.

5.3. Perceptions of English Use in and out of School

Learners displayed mixed feelings about using English to communicate with classmates during EFL classes. In Group 1, only 10.3% agreed they enjoyed such interactions, while 21.2% disagreed, with neutral and unsure responses making up nearly 50%. Group 2 presented similar patterns, with 24.1%

agreeing and 25% disagreeing. Most learners confirmed a clear distinction between classroom and out-of-class contexts (OOCs), as 92.53% recognized noticeable differences in English use.

Classroom experiences combined teacher guidance, which fostered understanding, with challenges such as unengaging activities, fear of mistakes due to frequent corrections, and a focus on grammar that limited speaking opportunities. Comparisons with higher-achieving peers were discouraging for some students.

In OOCs, learners engaged in enjoyable, relaxed activities, fostering confidence and fluency. Mistakes were not scrutinized, and communication was driven by personal motivation, reducing anxiety. However, some learners expressed shyness when speaking with native speakers due to concerns about fluency.

OOCs were appreciated for facilitating communication. In Group 1, 67.6% agreed or strongly agreed they enjoyed these interactions, with a slightly higher 68.2% in Group 2. A strong correlation ($r=0.934$) confirmed consistent enjoyment of English communication outside school.

These findings underline OOCs' role in complementing in-class learning by offering low-pressure environments that encourage authentic language use. Educators should integrate opportunities that reflect the spontaneity and freedom of OOCs into formal instruction.

5.4. EFL Beyond Classrooms: Favourite Activities and Opportunities

Secondary school learners identified diverse opportunities for using English in out-of-class contexts (OOCs), with television, radio, and the internet emerging as their most enjoyable activities. Learners from both groups frequently engaged in reading for entertainment, such as magazines, newspapers, and novels, with 37.4% in Group 1 and 36.4% in Group 2 participating. Group 2 showed a stronger interest in global affairs (10.3% strongly agreed) and professional materials (<6.4%). An EFL teacher noted the internet's influence, describing learners as “real seekers, always hungry for new challenges.” This aligns with Liu's (6-10) findings on how platforms like TikTok and Xiaohongshu are increasingly used by learners for informal language learning, offering immersive and socially rich environments that support vocabulary acquisition and cultural awareness.

Speaking English within social networks was a popular activity, with 33.3% in Group 1 and 40.9% in Group 2 strongly agreeing. Fewer than 10% in either group disagreed, confirming the role of OOCs in fostering practical language use.

Key preferences included: (1) Listening to music: universally popular, with 93.9% in Group 1 and 93.2% in Group 2 participating; (2) Watching films/videos: favored by 98% in Group 1 and 88.6% in Group 2; (3) Playing

games: engaged in by nearly 90% of both groups; (4) Writing activities: emails, chats, and messages were preferred in Group 1 (86.9%), while Group 2 focused more on project works and personal blogs; (5) Reading Online: Selected by 71.7% in Group 1 and 52.3% in Group 2. Figure 4 presents a visual comparison of the most popular out-of-class English learning activities among learners in Group 1 and Group 2. The graph highlights both shared interests and notable differences in how each group engages with English beyond the classroom

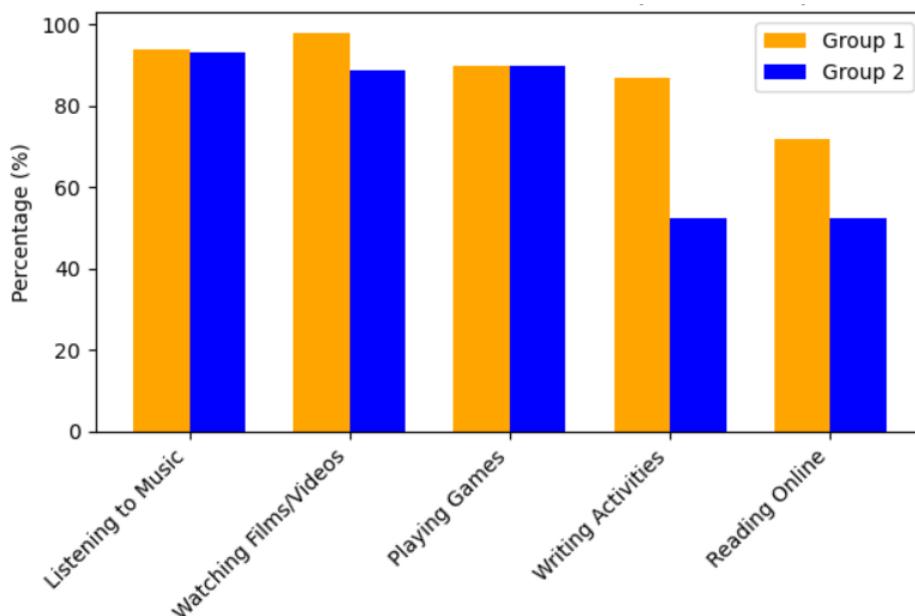


Figure 4 Favourite activities in OOCs for Group 1 and Group 2

Overall, these activities reflect learners' ability to integrate English into daily life, actively shaping their personal learning ecologies to meet their goals.

5.5. Personal English Ecologies: A Pathway to Skill Growth

The findings reveal that secondary school learners engage in a wide array of activities within their personal English learning ecologies, generating significant out-of-class learning opportunities. These activities, which are rooted in entertainment and social networks, play a pivotal role in fostering learners' proficiency across all language skills.

Online materials, such as articles and news, were the most favored reading resource, with over 50% of Group 1 selecting them. Other materials, like novels and academic books, were chosen by approximately 40%, though printed resources showed low engagement in Group 2 (15.9%). These

activities enriched learners' vocabulary, general knowledge, and reading speed. Diary entries illustrated this, with one eighth grader exploring Charles Bukowski's works. Music was the most popular activity, complemented by radio and news. Learners cited improvements in pronunciation, comprehension of native speakers, and coping with fast-paced speech as primary benefits. Though less common, writing activities, such as blogs and project works, were more frequent in Group 2, while Group 1 favored emails and chats. These practices enhanced spelling, grammar accuracy, and writing confidence, though fewer learners reported progress in structured writing. Interacting with native speakers (NSs) helped learners gain confidence, fluency, and overcome the fear of public speaking. Gaming and social interactions further supported everyday conversational skills.

Learners noted these activities made English enjoyable, relevant, and effective, providing opportunities to apply the language naturally. From expanding vocabulary through music to building confidence via social interactions, personal English learning ecologies emerged as dynamic spaces that complemented classroom instruction and promoted real-world application.

5.6. Effective Input and Output Practices

Secondary school learners benefit from engaging with diverse English-language input in out-of-class contexts (OOCs), enhancing comprehension and vocabulary through self-directed and enjoyable activities. Learners' diaries highlighted their use of films, books, recipes, and song lyrics, which often combined personal interests with language learning. For example, Poly, a seventh grader, expanded her vocabulary with words like "grab" and "breathless" from songs and fairy tales. Watching movies or YouTube videos was especially popular; an eighth grader expressed pride in understanding a film without subtitles, which boosted confidence. Activities like documentaries and interviews also provided authentic language exposure, fostering understanding and contextual vocabulary. These practices underscore the pivotal role of comprehensible input in making English acquisition both accessible and enjoyable.

Output practices required learners to actively produce English, whether for solving real-world problems or engaging socially. Speaking opportunities ranged from helping tourists with directions and debating educational systems with peers, to casual conversations with friends or family. Writing was equally dynamic: learners emailed institutions, maintained diaries, or explored creativity by crafting stories, such as a novel about a dog's adventures in New York City. These activities enabled learners to improve fluency, accuracy, and confidence while making language use practical and empowering. By integrating their interests and needs into their language

practices, learners transitioned from hesitant users to confident communicators, showcasing the transformational role of their personal English ecologies.

5.7. Constructing Identity Through English: Insights from EFL Learners

Romanian secondary school EFL learners actively construct their social identity through meaningful interactions and experiences in the target language (TL). These interactions, as described by Bakhtin (259) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (249-252), enable learners to shape their self-perception as English users while contributing to the identities of those they interact with.

Learners' diary entries illustrate how English interactions foster self-confidence and fluency. For example, one seventh grader gained confidence discussing friendship quotes with a friend, realizing her growing love for speaking English. Similarly, another seventh grader reflected on speaking fluently during a conversation with her cousin from America, while an eighth grader took pride in using English to joke with his cousin from England. Transformative moments also emerged in interactions with native speakers, such as one eighth grader who felt a profound shift in seeing English as a natural part of his life after speaking with a foreigner.

Reading and writing activities bolstered learners' sense of accomplishment. One learner described feeling "empowered" and proud after mastering new words and conversing confidently with her best friend. For many, English transitioned from a foreign to a second language, as they grew increasingly comfortable using it in their daily lives.

An EFL teacher observed that learners communicated self-confidently and viewed English as a second language, integrating it naturally into personal and academic contexts. For example, one learner noted that keeping a diary in English offered privacy, emphasizing the language's integration into her personal life.

The identity-building process highlights the importance of positive, self-driven interactions with the TL. These experiences empower learners to transition from hesitant users to confident English communicators, affirming English as a key component of their self-expression and identity.

5.8. Social Bonds and English Growth in Interpersonal Spaces

For secondary school EFL learners, communities of practice - formed through shared activities like using English - serve as crucial platforms for language development. Diary entries illustrate how interpersonal spaces with family, friends, and peers provide opportunities to practice English in meaningful ways. For example, an eighth grader described speaking English all day with his cousin from England and attempting an "English-only day" challenge with

friends. A seventh grader shared how conversing with friends from Scotland allowed her to experiment with accents, deepening her linguistic confidence and connections.

Support from more proficient speakers often played a pivotal role, aligning with scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). For instance, a seventh grader recounted how her best friend explained challenging phrases, while an eighth grader appreciated help from friends in England, which boosted his confidence and fluency. These interactions fostered mutual understanding and negotiation, enriching learners' vocabulary and communication skills.

By engaging in reciprocal exchanges, such as joking with family or interacting with international peers, learners built strong social bonds while expanding their English proficiency. The supportive framework of their communities empowered them to navigate their ZPD, making English a natural and effective tool for real-life communication.

5.9. Fostering Growth: Romanian EFL Learners' Proactive Journey

Romanian secondary school EFL learners actively engage with their personal English learning ecologies, driving significant progress in their linguistic proficiency. Responses to the survey confirmed learners' perceptions of improvement and revealed how their chosen activities in out-of-class contexts (OOCs) contributed to their growth. Diary entries further illustrate their creative and resourceful initiatives.

Learners demonstrated ownership of their learning through curiosity and determination. One student enriched their vocabulary by analyzing song lyrics, while another turned watching videos into an opportunity to learn new words through context or by consulting online dictionaries. During a visit to a museum, another learner took notes on interesting exhibits, using the experience to build vocabulary. Others expanded their word knowledge and reading comprehension by immersing themselves in books and online resources.

Innovative methods were also employed to enhance language skills. Some learners searched for song lyrics or delved into novels to improve writing abilities, while others explored the meanings and pronunciations of challenging English words. These activities showcased a blend of curiosity and practical application, enabling learners to develop vocabulary, pronunciation, and overall language competence.

Learners extended their English use to real-world scenarios. Writing emails, such as booking hotel rooms, provided practical opportunities to apply their skills, while maintaining correspondence with pen pals or composing personal creative works like stories helped refine their writing further.

Through active participation in diverse learning ecologies, these learners not only developed their English proficiency but also shaped their identities as confident users of the language. Their creativity, autonomy, and commitment to self-improvement empowered them to integrate English naturally into their daily lives and interactions. These experiences highlighted the transformative role of personal learning environments in building linguistic and personal growth.

In conclusion, Romanian EFL learners exemplify how motivation, resourcefulness, and diverse learning opportunities drive language improvement, showcasing the power of personal English learning ecologies in fostering growth.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in shaping the English learning experiences of Romanian secondary school learners. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative insights, the findings highlight the intricate interplay between learners' personal English learning ecologies, their social interactions, and the development of their linguistic abilities and social identity.

The research reveals that secondary school learners actively integrate English into their daily lives through a variety of self-directed activities, ranging from listening to music, watching films, and reading online materials to engaging in conversations with peers and writing personal diaries. These activities foster learners' vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, listening comprehension, and confidence in speaking and writing. In this way, learners create dynamic and flexible learning environments that support both their linguistic development and their personal growth.

Learners' social identity as English users is shaped and strengthened through authentic interactions in their communities of practice. Supportive relationships with peers, family, and international contacts provide scaffolding within their interpersonal spaces, enabling learners to navigate linguistic challenges and build self-assurance in using English. The concept of personal English learning ecologies proved critical in understanding how learners' agency and resourcefulness drive their success in OOCs, contributing to the development of skills that extend far beyond the classroom.

The study also highlights the importance of bridging formal instruction with OOCs, as these contexts complement each other in providing comprehensive learning opportunities. While classrooms offer structured guidance, grammar instruction, and theoretical knowledge, OOCs enable learners to apply the language in practical, low-pressure situations, sparking intrinsic motivation and personal connection to the target language.

In conclusion, the findings emphasize the transformative potential of OOCs in EFL education. They provide compelling evidence that equipping learners with the tools and encouragement to explore personal learning ecologies can lead to significant improvements in their proficiency and confidence. For educators, these results suggest a need to integrate practices that mirror the authenticity and engagement of OOCs into formal settings. For learners, the study serves as a testament to the power of curiosity, creativity, and social interaction in mastering a foreign language. By embracing these opportunities, secondary school EFL learners are not only improving their English skills but also shaping their futures as confident global communicators.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English language learning, it is not without its limitations. One notable limitation is its reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias as learners' perceptions might not fully align with objective measures of their proficiency or progress. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on secondary school learners in Romania, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other educational or cultural contexts. Variability in the detail and depth of diary entries also poses a challenge, as some learners provide richer data than others. To extend or improve the research, future studies could incorporate a more diverse sample of participants from different countries and age groups to explore broader patterns. Integrating objective measures of language proficiency, such as standardized testing or teacher evaluations, alongside self-assessment, could also enhance the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, longitudinal research tracking learners' progress over time would offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of personal learning ecologies on linguistic development.

Works Cited

- Allen, Irene E., and Christine A. Seaman. "Likert Scales and Data Analyses." *Quality Progress*, vol. 40, no. 7, July 2007: 64–65.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barron, Brigid. "Interest and Self-Sustained Learning as Catalysts of Development: A Learning Ecology Perspective." *Human Development*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2006): 193–224.
- Benson, Phil. *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. London: Routledge, 2011.

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.
- Cabot, Maite. "Personal English Learning Ecologies and Meaningful Input with Digital and Non-Digital Artefacts." *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2018): 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1891-943x-2018-02-03>
- Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2018.
- Creswell, John W., and Vicki L. Plano Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2017.
- Gardner, Robert C. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold, 1985.
- Guan, Lihang, Ellen Yue Zhang, and Michelle Mingyue Gu. "Examining Generative AI-Mediated Informal Digital Learning of English Practices with Social Cognitive Theory: A Mixed-Methods Study." *ReCALL*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344024000259>.
- Lai, Christine, and Mingyue Gu. "Self-Regulated Out-of-Class Language Learning with Technology." *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2011): 317–335.
- Lantolf, James P., and Steven L. Thorne. *Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Liu, Guangxiang & Zhao, Xian & Teng, Mark Feng. (2025). "TikTok Refugees, Digital Migration, and the Expanding Affordances of Xiaohongshu (RedNote) for Informal Language Learning." *International Journal of TESOL Studies* (2025): 1-16. 10.58304/ijts.250123.
- Meștereagă, Elena, and Daniel Dejica. "Exploring Out-of-Class Contexts in EFL Learning: Romanian High School Students' Perspectives and Practices." *Swedish Journal of Romanian Studies* 2 (2025): 229-240
- Meștereagă, Elena. *The Role of out-of-class contexts in EFL Learning*. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2021.
- Norton, Bonny. *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. Harlow: Longman, 2000.
- Pearson, Karl. "Note on Regression and Inheritance in the Case of Two Parents." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, 58 (1895): 240–242.
- Socket, Geoff. *The Online Informal Learning of English*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

- Sundqvist, Pia. "Extramural English Matters: Out-of-School English and Its Impact on Swedish Ninth Graders' Oral Proficiency and Vocabulary." *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2009): 480–509.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald, and Janet M. Fuller. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.
- Wu, Ronglan. "The Relationship Between Online Learning Self-Efficacy, Informal Digital Learning of English, and Student Engagement in Online Classes: The Mediating Role of Social Presence." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14 (2023): 1-14.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1266009>.