

**TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH OUT-OF-CLASS
CONTEXTS IN EFL**

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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Romanian university students enrolled in a financial degree program taught in English. Building on previous research into secondary and high school EFL learners, this analysis offers fresh insights into university students' unique practices, perceptions, and personal English learning ecologies. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the study explores students' engagement with OOCs, examining their impact on language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Results reveal that OOCs significantly enrich learners' vocabulary, fluency, and confidence, with students favouring activities like watching English-language media, listening to music, and engaging in face-to-face communication. Furthermore, the study highlights the pivotal role of personal learning ecologies in fostering linguistic competence and shaping students' identities as English users. Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a focus on a single academic program. Recommendations for future research include expanding participant diversity, conducting longitudinal studies, and exploring the role of technology in OOCs. This study underscores the transformative potential of OOCs in enhancing English proficiency and fostering authentic, real-world language use among university students.*

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); out-of-class contexts (OOCs); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); informal language learning; language skills development; personal learning ecologies*

1. Introduction

Out-of-class contexts (OOCs) have become increasingly recognized as essential for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. These contexts offer learners the opportunity to engage with the language in authentic and meaningful ways beyond the confines of the classroom. Activities within OOCs, such as interactions on social media, consuming entertainment media, personal reading, and communication with native and non-native speakers, serve to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. For university students, these contexts often extend into academic and professional domains, further aiding in the development of linguistic competence aligned with their educational and career aspirations.

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, 2021), which explored the general dynamics of OOCs in fostering language development. It further complements existing studies in the field, including the recent examination of secondary (Meștereagă and Dejica, 2025a) and high school learners' perspectives (Meștereagă and Dejica, 2025b), providing a comparative framework while offering unique insights into university students' experiences and practices. By focusing on this group, the study adds depth to our understanding of how learners at higher levels of education utilize OOCs for language acquisition.

This study focuses on examining the role of OOCs in fostering English proficiency among university students enrolled in a financial degree program at a Romanian university, where English serves as the medium of instruction. The research explores the distinct characteristics of university-level learners' engagement with OOCs, their perceptions of English use, and the opportunities they harness for language development. Its primary objective is to shed light on how OOCs contribute to university students' linguistic growth across core skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify the most valuable activities that students undertake in OOCs, analyze the role of personal English learning ecologies in shaping their development, and compare their experiences to those of secondary and high school learners previously examined.

The article is methodically organized in four main sections followed by a conclusion. The literature review offers a theoretical grounding by analyzing sociocultural perspectives, language acquisition models, and findings from previous studies on OOCs. Following this, the research methodology section outlines the mixed-method approach employed in the study, including detailed descriptions of the participants, data collection instruments, procedures, and ethical considerations. The findings section presents a comprehensive analysis of university students' perceptions, preferences, and skills development within OOCs, contextualized through comparisons with younger learners. This is followed by the discussion, which interprets the results within broader educational and sociocultural frameworks, offering actionable insights for educators and learners. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the study's key contributions and implications while proposing areas for further research.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this study endeavors to deepen our understanding of how OOCs support university students in enhancing their English proficiency. It aims to provide valuable insights into personalized language learning strategies within higher education, emphasizing the importance of leveraging OOCs for academic and professional success.

2. Literature Review

Out-of-class contexts (OOCs) represent an essential dimension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, offering learners opportunities to engage with the language in authentic settings beyond formal classrooms. The study of OOCs is informed by sociocultural perspectives, activity theory, and language acquisition

models that emphasize social interaction, meaningful input, and language production.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) highlights the importance of social environments and interactions in developing higher-order functions, forming the basis of activity theory. These interactions mediate learners' cognitive development, emphasizing the role of sign systems and the negotiation of meaning. Similarly, Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) proposes that successful language learning occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level ($i+1$), facilitating acquisition through interaction. Swain's output hypothesis (1985) complements this by emphasizing the role of language production in noticing linguistic gaps, testing hypotheses, and negotiating meaning.

Learners' attitudes toward the target language (TL), its speakers, and the social context are crucial for language acquisition. Positive attitudes nurture motivation and proficiency, as highlighted by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Spolsky (1989). Motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, drives learners to persist in language learning despite challenges. Intrinsic motivation arises from self-interest and enjoyment, promoting spontaneous learning behavior (Deci & Flaste, 1996). Extrinsic motivation, influenced by societal attitudes and external rewards, complements intrinsic motivation in shaping learners' goals and outcomes (Ushioda, 2008). Norton & Toohey (2001) argue that learners' agency and social interactions are pivotal in constructing and reforming their identities as English users, highlighting the interplay between social practices and linguistic competence.

OOCs provide rich opportunities for English use, ranging from naturalistic language learning to structured activities initiated by learners. Benson (2011) categorizes OOCs into three types: naturalistic language learning, self-instruction, and self-directed naturalistic language learning. These contexts offer learners the chance to apply language skills in real-world scenarios, enhancing fluency and confidence. Studies by Nunan (1991), Brooks (1992), and Suh et al. (1999) demonstrate that learners' willingness to engage in out-of-class activities determines their success.

The advent of social media has revolutionized communication, providing virtual speech communities where EFL learners interact with native and non-native speakers. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube offer avenues for meaningful language practice. Research by Zourou (2012) and Dabbagh & Kitsantas (2012) underscores the role of social media in enabling personalized learning environments (PLEs) and fostering language acquisition.

Empirical investigations into OOCs reveal diverse insights into learners' experiences and perceptions. Barker (2004) and Hyland (2004) highlight social factors influencing learners' attitudes, while studies by Harrison and Freeman (1999) and Pickard (1996) explore the role of personal contexts in language learning. These studies underscore the importance of leveraging social networks and resources in supporting learners' linguistic development.

Learners' engagement with OOCs enriches their personal English learning ecologies, integrating reading, listening, speaking, and writing in naturalistic settings. As illustrated by studies on Romanian EFL learners, social environments play a critical role in shaping learners' experiences (Meșteareagă and

Dejica, 2005a). Similarly, Bentley (1998) advocates for the inclusion of all resources available in learners' contexts to maximize their learning potential.

The reviewed literature offers insights into the factors that shape and influence language learning, from motivation and social dynamics to learners' autonomy and their engagement with out-of-class contexts. These studies collectively underscore the complexity of second language acquisition and the importance of integrating both intrinsic and extrinsic elements in fostering learning success. Building on this theoretical foundation, the following section delves into the research methodology employed to investigate university students' engagement with out-of-class contexts in EFL, providing a structured approach to analyze the interplay of these factors in practice.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Creswell and Creswell, 2018), to investigate the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Romanian university students enrolled in a financial degree program taught in English. Data was collected through both quantitative and qualitative means, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and perceptions.

The study targeted a group of 24 university students aged between 18 and 22, with a gender distribution of 54.2% female and 45.8% male. All participants were enrolled in a financial degree program at a Romanian university (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, ULBS), where English serves as the language of instruction. Participants were selected based on their active engagement with English both in and out of the classroom. Parental education levels, occupations, and linguistic proficiency were recorded to provide context for learners' familial backgrounds.

An online questionnaire was the primary instrument for collecting data, hosted on the ULBS platform. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data and open-ended questions to collect qualitative insights into learners' perceptions and experiences. Structured statements allowed participants to reflect on their use of English in OOCs, favourite activities involving English, perceived improvements in language skills, and the role of personal learning ecologies.

The questionnaire was supplemented by additional qualitative data from informal discussions with participants, enabling clarification and deeper exploration of specific aspects of the responses.

Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire within a specified timeframe, ensuring uniformity in data collection. Responses were analyzed quantitatively using percentages to illustrate patterns and trends across the group. Qualitative data was examined thematically to identify recurring themes and insights related to the role of OOCs in EFL learning.

The study design facilitated comparisons between university students and previously studied groups of secondary and high school EFL learners. This allowed for the identification of unique features and trends among university-level participants, while situating their experiences within broader contexts of EFL learning.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research committee to ensure compliance with institutional guidelines. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to their participation, ensuring voluntary involvement.

4. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the mixed-method study investigating the role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Romanian university students. The results are organized to highlight patterns and key themes that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data, offering a nuanced understanding of learners' engagement with OOCs and their impact on language acquisition.

4.1. Students' background

The analysed group totalled 24 university students, aged between 18 and 22. The gender distribution in this cohort is 54.2% female and 45.8% male. Familial background data highlights distinctive features compared to groups of secondary and high school EFL learners previously analyzed.

Most mothers of the university students hold university degrees, with 62.5% having completed higher education, while 50% of fathers are high school graduates, with a significant 45.8% having also graduated from university. In terms of occupation, a dominant proportion of parents work in intellectual jobs—60.9% of mothers and 47.8% of fathers—suggesting an environment conducive to academic aspirations. A smaller percentage of parents are proficient English speakers, with 37.5% of fathers and 33.3% of mothers speaking English, while the majority are not English users.

The range of years spent studying English varies significantly among these students, from as few as 5 years to as many as 18. This variability demonstrates that even those with fewer years of formal EFL education can successfully pursue higher education programs in English. This observation aligns with the expanded range found among high school learners, indicating that sufficient motivation and opportunities can compensate for limited years of study.

4.2. Self-Perceived English Proficiency

The majority of students rated their skills as "good" or "very good," with "very good" being the most frequently selected level for reading and writing. Notably, no students rated themselves as having "none" or "poor" proficiency in any skill, a stark contrast to secondary and high school participants. This shift highlights the advanced linguistic competence of these university students, who no longer perceive English as merely a foreign language but rather as their medium of education.

For some, English transcends the role of an FL. One student explicitly described English as now being his second language (L2), while another commented, "I simply started to live like it is my mother tongue." These remarks emphasize the transformative role of English in their academic and social lives, underscoring its integration into their identity as university students.

4.3. University Students' Perceptions of the Use of English In and Out of the Classroom

When asked about their use of English in out-of-class contexts (OOCs), 75% of university students indicated daily use, 20.8% weekly use, and only 4.2% said they rarely use English. This aligns with their strong disagreement (75%) or disagreement (20.8%) with the idea that English use is limited to classes or home assignments. An identical percentage strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they study English only to pass compulsory exams, showing a clear commitment to broader language use.

University students showed greater acknowledgment of the importance of English for their future, with 83.3% strongly agreeing and 12.5% agreeing, higher than both secondary and high school groups. This difference reflects their age and university status, which likely sharpen their awareness of English's role in future prospects. While 45.8% were neutral about studying abroad, 37.5% strongly agreed and 12.5% agreed that they would pursue opportunities to study in another country if possible. Furthermore, 75% expressed a strong or general desire to secure employment in international or global companies, illustrating their vision for an English-dependent career path.

4.4. Enjoyment of Communication in English

The responses reveal a progressive preference for using English in university courses. While 41.7% of students strongly agreed and 33.3% agreed that they enjoy communicating in English with peers during courses, this stands in stark contrast to secondary and high school learners, whose perceptions often displayed discrepancies. This difference is not solely linked to age, years of study, or linguistic competence, as many high school participants had achieved advanced proficiency levels (e.g., Cambridge C1/C2 certification). Instead, the difference likely stems from the nature of class activities. EFL classes involve pre-arranged speaking activities focusing on language skills, whereas university courses require meaningful communication to solve real-world problems in English, shifting the focus from language proficiency to task-based outcomes. As a result, university students enjoy using English more during classes, as it serves a functional and authentic purpose.

However, the preference for communication in OOCs is even stronger. When asked about communicating with foreigners or native speakers in these settings, 70.8% strongly agreed, and 8.3% agreed. This preference exceeds the figures observed for high school and secondary school learners, reflecting university students' active engagement with English beyond the classroom.

4.5. Differences in Classroom and OOC Use

Students highlighted distinct differences between English use in classrooms and OOCs. Classroom activities were described as guided, grammar-focused, and academic in tone. Students mentioned that expressing their thoughts in class required deeper consideration, and some noted that their professors were not always proficient in English, which occasionally affected the clarity of instruction. The emphasis on grammar and specific skill-building tasks like pronunciation and

fill-in-the-blank exercises contributed to a structured but less natural learning environment. Interestingly, two students highlighted a reliance on books or online materials in English to better understand course content due to professors' language limitations, aligning with critiques of the Romanian university system's resource management (Burduja, 2017).

Conversely, OOCs provided students with more engaging, practical, and confidence-building opportunities to use English. They valued the freedom from judgment, the focus on real-life communication skills, and the higher quality of materials available through books or the internet. One student compared classroom learning to isolated-muscle training in a gym, whereas OOCs resembled full-body training in real-world tasks. This analogy underscores the complementary roles of structured learning and naturalistic practice, with the student recommending a balanced 3:2 ratio of communicative to form-focused activities for optimal learning.

In sum, university students demonstrate a strong preference for using English in meaningful, real-world contexts. They appreciate the role of OOCs in building their confidence, practical skills, and linguistic proficiency, while recognizing the complementary contributions of classroom learning. Their perceptions emphasize the importance of integrating authentic communication tasks into EFL programs to better prepare learners for real-world challenges.

4.6. Opportunities and Favourite Activities for English Use

The study also sought to identify the opportunities for English use in out-of-class contexts (OOCs) as perceived by university students. Among the group, the most polarized statement with unanimous agreement showed that students enjoy the diversity of English-language TV programs, radio, and internet content. This preference is corroborated by their responses to related questions in the questionnaire, where watching films or videos, listening to music, and reading online materials emerged as the highest-rated activities.

A notable aspect is the students' increased interest in global events as a result of learning English, a sentiment that was at least 10% higher among university students compared to secondary and high school groups. This demonstrates the pivotal role English plays not only in their education but also in broadening their worldview.

Based on the answers to the questions related to the activities involving English, it was evident that more university students recognize reading for entertainment as an opportunity enabled by their English skills, compared to reading professional or academic materials. Our data indicates that reading online magazines, articles, and news is the most favored reading activity (79.2%), followed by reading short stories, novels, and academic books (70.8%). This group stands out as the first in the study to register over 50% for "reading printed magazines, articles, and newspapers," reflecting the greater availability of printed English materials in the large city where the university is located, compared to smaller towns. A student confirmed this by writing, "In English, you have more materials, study resources which are not always available in Romanian."

Listening to music (87.5%) and watching films or videos (91.7%) were the most popular activities overall, showcasing the entertainment value of English.

Interestingly, "speaking with non-native speakers face to face" achieved a high score (70.8%), significantly higher than the figures recorded for secondary and high school learners, which hovered around or below 50%. This demonstrates the confidence and communicative engagement of university students in diverse social interactions.

The data also revealed a noteworthy trend: university students favored "writing project works" (54.2%) more than playing computer games in English (45.8%), reversing the trend observed among younger learners, who prioritized gaming over writing. This highlights the academic orientation of university students and their focus on productive language use as part of their education and professional aspirations.

The diverse opportunities for English use, coupled with the university students' preferences for specific activities, underline the integrative role of OOCs in supporting language learning and personal development. By leveraging resources such as printed materials, online content, and meaningful social interactions, university students engage with English in ways that both broaden their perspectives and strengthen their linguistic competence.

4.7. The Role of Personal English Learning Ecologies in Skills Development

The overwhelming majority of university students (95.8%) agreed that their out-of-class activities improved their overall English proficiency, with only one exception. Notably, 91.7% reported an enriched vocabulary as a key outcome of these activities, while 70.8% acknowledged gains in both general knowledge and reading speed. These improvements underline the significant contribution of OOCs in fostering essential language skills.

For the first time in this study, the primary perceived improvement in listening skills was understanding native speakers (83.3%), surpassing the ability to learn the pronunciation of individual words, which still scored highly (79%). However, coping with fast spoken messages remained a challenge for most students across all groups, although 66.7% of this group considered it an area of improvement. Interestingly, many participants highlighted video materials with accompanying visual aids as particularly helpful in understanding fast-paced dialogue, illustrating the importance of multi-sensory learning tools in overcoming barriers to comprehension.

In terms of speaking skills, fluency was identified as the most improved aspect (79.2%), in contrast with secondary and high school EFL learners, who prioritized overcoming fear of speaking. University students' established identity as English speakers, shaped through their social networks and meaningful communication, likely contributes to this distinction. More than half of the group (54.2%) reported being able to converse confidently with native speakers, while fewer participants (37.5%) cited overcoming fear as a significant improvement. These findings highlight the evolving priorities and self-assurance of university-level learners.

Writing activities also proved beneficial, with 70.8% of students reporting improvements in avoiding grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. Additionally, 50% of participants noted an increased ability to write in an organized manner.

These outcomes reflect the cumulative benefits of academic and personal writing tasks in refining students' written communication.

A subset of students (33%) provided written reflections on how out-of-class activities contributed to their English learning. Key themes included (1) enriched vocabulary and expanded general knowledge, (2) accelerated learning facilitated by engaging activities, (3) improved accuracy and fluency in speaking, (4) enhanced communication skills leading to better global understanding, and (5) strengthened neural pathways for language processing.

These insights emphasize that personal English learning ecologies—comprising opportunities for reading, listening, speaking, and writing in authentic contexts—are invaluable in supporting language acquisition. The integration of these ecologies into students' lives not only strengthens their linguistic abilities but also fosters a deeper engagement with the language.

The findings underscore the complementary role of OOCs in enriching university students' English proficiency and preparing them for real-world challenges. By embracing these opportunities, students gain practical skills and confidence, making their personal environments essential learning spaces.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the significant role of out-of-class contexts (OOCs) in fostering English proficiency among Romanian university students enrolled in a financial degree program taught in English. The findings highlighted how OOCs contribute to the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills by providing opportunities for authentic language use in academic, personal, and professional settings. Through meaningful engagement with diverse activities—such as reading for entertainment or academic purposes, listening to media, and speaking with native and non-native speakers—students demonstrated substantial improvements in fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and overall linguistic competence. Moreover, OOCs proved instrumental in enriching personal English learning ecologies and nurturing learners' identity as English users.

The study emphasizes the transformative potential of OOCs in bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world application. University students exhibited a strong preference for using English in genuine communication tasks, particularly in OOCs, where the pressure of correctness was minimized, and confidence could flourish. These contexts empower learners to develop their language skills in a more relaxed and integrated manner, complementing formal instruction and facilitating a deeper connection with the English language.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted with a relatively small sample size of 24 university students, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Secondly, the scope of the study was restricted to students within a single financial degree program in Romania, potentially excluding insights from learners in other academic disciplines or geographic regions. Thirdly, while the mixed-method approach provided valuable quantitative and qualitative data, additional methods such as longitudinal tracking or observational studies might have offered further depth and insight into how OOCs evolve over time and impact learners' progress.

Finally, the study predominantly focused on learners' self-perceptions, which, while revealing, might not fully capture objective measures of linguistic improvement.

Future research could address these limitations by involving larger and more diverse samples, including students from multiple universities, fields of study, and countries. Investigating OOCs among learners with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds would provide richer insights into their universality and adaptability. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking learners' engagement with OOCs over time would allow researchers to examine the sustained impact of these contexts on language development. Further exploration into the role of technology, particularly social media and online learning platforms, could uncover innovative ways to leverage OOCs for personalized and inclusive language learning strategies. Studies incorporating observational methods or experimental designs could also provide objective evidence of improvements in specific language skills.

By acknowledging the limitations and proposing avenues for further research, this study aims to inspire continued exploration into the multifaceted role of OOCs in EFL learning. With their potential to empower learners in dynamic, interactive, and context-rich environments, OOCs hold immense promise for enhancing language proficiency and fostering lifelong engagement with English.

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