

**Diana Cojocnean**

**The vocabulary learning behavior  
of Romanian high school students  
in a digital context**

**Presa Universitară Clujeană**

**Diana Cojocnean**

**The vocabulary learning behavior  
of Romanian high school students  
in a digital context**



**Diana Cojocnean**

**The vocabulary learning behavior  
of Romanian high school students  
in a digital context**

**Presa Universitară Clujeană**

**2017**

*Referenți științifici:*

**Conf. univ. dr. Sonia Munteanu**

**Conf. univ. dr. Alina Preda**

ISBN 978-606-37-0256-3

© 2017 Autoarea volumului. Toate drepturile rezervate. Reproducerea integrală sau parțială a textului, prin orice mijloace, fără acordul autoarei, este interzisă și se pedepsește conform legii.

**Tehnoredactare computerizată: Marius-Cristian Nuna**

**Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai**

**Presa Universitară Clujeană**

**Director: Codruța Săcelean**

**Str. Hasdeu, nr. 51**

**400371 Cluj-Napoca, România**

**Tel./fax: (+40)-264-597.401**

**E-mail: editura@editura.ubbcluj.ro**

**<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/>**

## Table of contents

Abstract .....	11
Acknowledgements .....	13
List of tables .....	14
List of figures .....	17
List of Appendices .....	18
Acronyms and abbreviations .....	19
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	21
1.1. Romanian EFL students learning English vocabulary .....	21
1.2. Research on Vocabulary learning strategies in a digital context .....	24
1.3. Rationale for the study .....	26
1.4. Research questions .....	28
1.5. Significance of the study .....	29
1.6. Outline of the study .....	30
CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT .....	33
2.1. Teaching foreign languages in Romania .....	33
2.1.1. The inter-war period .....	33
2.1.2. The dark-age (1948–1960) .....	34
2.1.3. The '70 onwards .....	35
2.1.4. The transition period (1989–present) .....	35
2.2. Particularities of Romanian people learning foreign languages .....	36

2.3. English language teaching and learning in Romania .....	37
2.4. The linguistic distance: English and Romanian .....	38
2.4.1. Latin, English and Romanian .....	40
2.5. Description of the population taking part in the study .....	43
CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	47
3.1. Defining language learning strategies .....	47
3.2. Taxonomies of LLS .....	49
3.3. Defining Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) .....	52
3.4. Review of foundational taxonomies on vocabulary learning strategies .....	53
3.5. Explicit and incidental learning of vocabulary .....	63
3.6. Review of VLS studies investigating the gender, age, academic profile and language profile variables .....	70
3.6.1. Students' gender .....	70
3.6.2. Students' academic profile .....	71
3.6.3. Students' age .....	73
3.6.4. Students' language program .....	74
3.6.5. Linguistic and cultural background .....	75
3.7. Vocabulary learning approaches in a Computer and Mobile Assisted Language Learning context .....	76
3.7.1. Incidental and explicit vocabulary learning approaches with CALL and MALL .....	81
3.8. Attitudes and engagement with vocabulary learning in a CALL and MALL context .....	93
3.9. Summary of the chapter .....	95
CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY .....	97
4.1. Research framework .....	97
4.2. Research design and theoretical justification .....	98
4.2.1. Research paradigm: Pragmatism .....	98

*Table of contents*

4.2.2. Research approach: mixed methods .....	101
4.2.3. Research strategy: sequential exploratory .....	103
4.3. Research methods .....	105
4.3.1. The focus group interview .....	105
4.3.2. The questionnaire .....	108
4.3.3. Combining the focus group and the questionnaire .....	109
4.4. Romanian schools and sampling procedures .....	110
4.4.1. The qualitative sample .....	111
4.4.2. The quantitative sample .....	112
4.5. Instruments .....	114
4.5.1. The focus group interview guide .....	114
4.5.2. The Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire .....	116
4.6. Data collection procedures .....	122
4.6.1. The focus group interviews .....	122
4.6.2. The administration of the questionnaire .....	123
4.7. Data analysis procedures .....	124
4.7.1. The focus group interviews .....	125
4.7.2. The questionnaire .....	126
4.8. Measuring data quality .....	127
4.8.1. Validity and Reliability .....	127
4.8.2. Credibility and trustworthiness .....	129
4.9. Ethical dimensions .....	131
4.9.1. Voluntary participation .....	131
4.9.2. Informed consent .....	131
4.9.3. Confidentiality, anonymity, data storage and non-traceability .....	132
4.9.4. Sensitivity .....	133
CHAPTER 5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESULTS ....	135
5.1. Demographic data across the independent variables .....	135
5.2. Overall vocabulary strategy use by Romanian students .....	138

5.2.1. Sources for encountering new words .....	138
5.2.2. Categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by Romanian students .....	141
5.2.3. Individual vocabulary learning strategies used by Romanian students .....	142
5.3. Differences in strategy use across the four independent variables .....	159
5.3.1. Use of vocabulary learning strategies by academic profile .....	159
5.3.2. Use of vocabulary learning strategies by language program .....	164
5.3.3. Use of vocabulary learning strategies by gender .....	168
5.3.4. Use of vocabulary learning strategies by age .....	170
5.4. Overall use of digital tools for vocabulary learning .....	172
5.4.1. Differences in the use of digital tools by academic profile, language program, gender and age .....	183
5.5. Students' attitudes towards the use of technology enhanced tools for vocabulary learning .....	188
5.5.1. Differences in attitudes by academic profile, language program, gender and age .....	192
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION .....	199
6.1. Framing the vocabulary learning behavior of Romanian high school students .....	199
6.1.1. Types of vocabulary learning strategies used by Romanian students .....	199
6.1.2. The most and least preferred vocabulary learning strategies used by Romanian students .....	206
6.2. Romanian students' use of digital tools for vocabulary learning and their attitudes towards the use of digital tools in vocabulary learning .....	210

*Table of contents*

6.3. Differences in vocabulary strategy use and digital tools across the four independent variables .....	219
6.3.1. Differences in vocabulary strategy use and digital tools use across gender .....	220
6.3.2. Differences in vocabulary strategy use and digital tools use across academic profile .....	221
6.3.3. Differences in vocabulary strategy use and digital tools use across language program .....	223
6.3.4. Differences in vocabulary strategy use and digital tools use across different age groups .....	224
6.3.5. Differences in students' attitudes towards the use of digital tools across the four independent variables .....	225
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION .....	227
7.1. Summary of the main findings .....	227
7.2. Contributions .....	230
7.2.1. Contributions to research on VLS .....	230
7.2.2. Contributions to research on CALL and MALL .....	231
7.2.3. Contributions to research on students' attitudes and motivation to use CALL and MALL resources .....	232
7.2.4. Contributions to the development of an instrument .....	234
7.3. Implications for theory and practice .....	234
7.4. Limitations of the study .....	239
REFERENCES .....	241
APPENDICES .....	269



## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the vocabulary learning behavior of Romanian high school students in a digital context. The research identifies the vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL high school students and focuses on how the choice of vocabulary learning strategies varies across four independent variables: students' age, gender, academic profile (math-ICT, humanities, science and economic-technical) and language program (intensive English, bilingual, normal). These variables are hypothesized to influence learners' vocabulary behavior.

Furthermore, the study examines the technology enhanced tools (computer and mobile assisted language learning tools) used by these students in their vocabulary learning as well as their attitudes towards using technology in vocabulary learning. Likewise, the study analyzes how students' choice of technology enhanced tools and their attitudes towards them vary across the four independent variables.

The study is a mixed methods investigation with 1,239 participants (60% female, 40% male, aged 14–19 years old) learning English as a foreign language in nine Romanian high schools. Of the 1,239 participants who filled in the self-reported questionnaire, 43 also participated in focus group discussions prior to the administration of the questionnaire.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics procedures whereas the qualitative data were

analyzed thematically. The results from both phases were integrated in the results chapter.

The main findings indicated that Romanian high school students prefer social strategies, followed by determination, metacognitive, cognitive and memory strategies. However, the usage of the strategies in these categories is medium towards low. As for individual vocabulary learning strategies, the participants reported that the impact of a new word, English media, guessing from context, associating the word with a picture and using cognates are frequently used strategies. The results also indicated that students' use of vocabulary learning strategies varies across the four independent variables. As far as the use of digital tools for vocabulary learning, the findings indicated that the students in this particular cultural context use few available digital tools with a preference for online dictionaries, games and social networking web sites. The results showed that overall Romanian students are not very familiar with computer and mobile assisted language learning tools, their attitudes towards the use of digital tools for vocabulary learning are neutral and they mostly associate the use of personal devices with their personal space, suggesting that they may not want to embed learning in their everyday activities.

The results enrich existing knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies in a Romanian cultural context and they also give us an insight into how high school students use computer and mobile assisted language tools in their vocabulary learning. Implications for theory and practice are also discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would firstly like to express my gratitude to my tutors, Dr. Philip Durrant and Dr. Esmaeel Abdollahzadeh for their constant constructive feedback, guidance and patience.

I am also very grateful to the head teachers of the nine Romanian schools for giving me permission to collect data from their schools. A BIG THANK you to the English teachers who administered the questionnaires in the schools participating in the study. This research project would not have been possible without their valuable help.

I would also like to thank to all the students who participated in my study whose insights and thoughtful ideas surprised me.

Also a big thank you to my family for their patience and support throughout the process.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to the members of our doctoral cohort, with whom I shared both research worries and joys. The friendships we developed during our research journey are truly valuable.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter briefly outlines the current research situation as to vocabulary learning in a digital context as well as the situation of students in this particular context having to learn vocabulary in English, the significance and rationale of the study as well as a description of the thesis organization.

### **1.1. Romanian EFL students learning English vocabulary**

I became interested in students' approach to vocabulary learning outside the class about two years ago when a student asked me how to learn the new words I have taught during that lesson. I was puzzled, and without thinking too much, I simply replied "they are only words, what can it be that difficult?" I thought about that reply for a long time as I knew from my personal experience with learning words that it was not always as easy as it appeared.

In the classroom, English language teachers explicitly teach the vocabulary covered in the syllabus preparing students for their Baccalaureate examination which includes a language competence examination. Success in the language examination does not depend entirely on vocabulary or grammar, all language skills being tested. Therefore, Romanian teachers do not bombard students with lists

of words to learn through memorization or repetition, but mainly explain the words in the context in which they appear. Even though students are taught vocabulary in class, followed by practice activities included in the textbook, not too much time is allocated to further consolidation or practice activities as the syllabus is imposed and needs to be covered within one academic year. Accordingly, the mastery of the words taught in class depends largely on the students themselves and on their approach to vocabulary learning. However, although strategy training is a well-known concept in language teaching, based on my experience as both a student and a teacher in this particular cultural context, I believe it is rarely used in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. Accordingly, these points made me interested in researching vocabulary learning strategies focusing on the strategies Romanian students use to learn or consolidate vocabulary within the language classroom but also outside it. Therefore my aim was to identify the strategies Romanian students use to learn English vocabulary, the strategies they use most and least as well as the way they integrate technology in learning vocabulary.

The advent of technological affordances may have impacted the way students look at vocabulary and more importantly the way language learning in general fits into the more global digital context. According to a survey conducted by Samsung on 1911 students aged 16–19 (Chilianu, 2013), 70% of Romanian high school students have a smartphone, 60% own a laptop whereas 19% have tablets. The same study uncovered that 92% of the participants use social networking on a regular basis. We know, therefore, that digital devices play a significant role in students' lives. It seems likely that

this will also have influenced their approach to learning. However, previous research has not investigated whether Romanian teenagers use their devices in language learning in general, or more specifically in foreign language vocabulary learning. Although, there is evidence related to Romanian students' ownership of digital tools, little is known about the use of these tools as strategies for vocabulary language learning.

Previous literature (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989, Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, Gu, 2002) has suggested that individual differences are important in vocabulary learning and that understanding these differences is important for pedagogical reasons enhancing implications for practice in the teaching and learning of vocabulary.

Accordingly, the study will focus on the differences in vocabulary learning strategies between females and males, between students enrolled in different academic profiles (math-ICT, humanities, economic-technical, science), between students enrolled in different language programs (intensive English, bilingual and regular) as well as between students aged 14–16 and students aged 17–19. I believe these differences may reveal interesting facts as to the strategies students use in order to learn vocabulary in English.

Thus, faced with the previously mentioned issues and with the personal need to find new ways to approach vocabulary learning at classroom level, the impetus for research that would enable me to investigate these issues was laid out.

## **1.2. Research on Vocabulary learning strategies in a digital context**

Vocabulary learning strategies represent a subcategory of language learning strategies, which are defined by Oxford (1990, p. 8) as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.” Vocabulary learning strategies have been defined as the actions students do in order to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in the long-term memory, recall them whenever necessary and further use them in language production (Catalán, 2003). To date, several vocabulary learning taxonomies have been proposed (Gu and Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001). Schmitt’s (1997) taxonomy had several advantages comparing to the others as, according to Catalán (2003), it is based on Oxford’s (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies, it could be used in different educational contexts, it is technologically simple and it also allows comparison with other studies. Much research on vocabulary learning strategies has focused on identifying the most and least used strategies as well as their degree of helpfulness in different cultural contexts (Schmitt, 1997). Other studies (Read, 1993, Nassaji, 2003) have attempted to measure the relationship between success in vocabulary learning and strategy use or have investigated the variables which influence vocabulary learning strategies, such as gender, cultural context, age or academic profile (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989, Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, Gu, 2002, Catalán, 2003). In most of the empirical studies (Sanaoui,

1995, Stoffer, 1995, Moir 1996, Gu and Johnson, 1996, Lawson and Hogben, 1996) on vocabulary learning strategies, the participants were university or adult students. Although there have been several studies using Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy in various cultural contexts, with the purpose to identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by learners, the cultural context of the current study has been under researched.

As in the case of previous research, the current study takes into account several independent variables which are hypothesized to influence the vocabulary strategies used by students. Accordingly, the current study investigates four independent variables (gender, age, academic profile, language program) which previous research (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989, Oxford and Nyikos, 1989, Catalán, 2003, Gu, 2002, Peacock and Hu, 2003, Muñoz, 2006, Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006) suggested may be important in determining students' vocabulary learning.

The current study envisages the emergence of various computer and mobile assisted tools for vocabulary learning and the way high school students make use of them in their vocabulary learning process. Although there has been a considerable amount of studies investigating vocabulary learning strategies in different cultural contexts, I am not aware of any which combined the identification of vocabulary learning strategies with the digital tools students might use for learning and consolidating vocabulary.

The impact of various technological affordances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may have had an impact on the choice and use of vocabulary learning strategies. However in this cultural context, little is known about learners' motivation and engagement with using technology

in language learning, the focus being mostly on teachers' use of technology in teaching. I believe students' use of technology in language learning is as important as teachers' use. Having empirical evidence to show how students feel about using technological affordances with a learning purpose in mind is important for language teachers who may want to adapt their teaching practices also by taking into account this aspect.

### **1.3. Rationale for the study**

The purpose of the present research is to investigate the vocabulary behavior of Romanian high school students in a digital context, with particular emphasis on four independent variables which are hypothesized to determine learners' vocabulary behavior. Since behavior is very much determined by attitudes, the study also aims to explore students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary in English using digital tools. I chose this particular cultural context because I work here which helps me connect research and practice, secondly I have previously done research in this context, which is very helpful in dealing with all the bureaucracy and ethical procedures and thirdly I was also a student in this education system which enables me to understand the topic from a student perspective as well. As several researchers (Green and Oxford, 1995, Politzer and McGroarty, 1985) suggested, I believe that research on learning strategies ought to be carried out in various cultural contexts. I also consider that the context of the study is interesting from a linguistic point of view since Romanian is part of the Romance family of languages, favoring thus language transfer between English

words with a Latin root and Romanian words to occur and so likely influencing the vocabulary strategies adopted.

The main reason why I chose this topic was to see the extent to which vocabulary learning strategies are actually used by students outside the classroom and whether the technological affordances, which enable them to quickly access information about new words, store and consolidate them easily, are actually used by students in this particular context. It is important to know these things as they may have implications for both theory and practice in the field of vocabulary learning with CALL and MALL. As far as theory is concerned, viewing students' learning with CALL and MALL through the students' perspective and also focusing on the differences in the variables investigated, might enrich the existing literature on the use of CALL and MALL in vocabulary learning. It will enrich the literature on CALL and MALL by finding out the extent to which students use digital tools in their vocabulary learning, the differences across the four independent variables in the use of digital tools as well as students' attitudes towards the way they could use technology in their vocabulary learning.

The current investigation has two main purposes:

- To gain an understanding of the vocabulary learning strategies Romanian students use;
- To find out how students make use of mobile and computer tools in their vocabulary learning;

## 1.4. Research questions

Based on the prospective relationship between learners' vocabulary strategy use and the selected independent variables and through a comprehensive review of the related literature, the following research questions were formed:

1. What types of vocabulary learning strategies do Romanian high school students use in a digital context?
2. What individual vocabulary learning strategies do Romanian high school students use mostly?
3. How do the types of vocabulary learning strategies vary across students' age, academic profiles, language program and gender?
4. What technology enhanced tools do the students use in their learning of vocabulary?
5. How does the students' use of digital tools for learning vocabulary vary across their age, academic profiles, language program and gender?
6. What are the students' attitudes towards the use of technology-enhanced tools in their vocabulary learning?
7. How do the students' attitudes vary across gender, age, language program, academic profiles?

RQ 1 investigates the types of vocabulary learning strategies (e.g. determination, social, metacognitive, cognitive, memory) Romanian high school students use whereas RQ 2 looks at students' usage of individual vocabulary learning strategies. RQ 3 explores how the types of VLS students use vary across the four independent

variables. These three questions enrich existing knowledge on VLS through the fact that research is conducted in a different cultural context analyzing variables which have been previously researched separately.

RQ 4 and 5 bring more originality to the study as they focus on students' vocabulary learning behavior in relation with their personal devices. These two questions enable me to further explore how vocabulary learning happens in a digital context and not only across the context of the current study. Likewise, these questions open up new areas as far as contribution to practice is concerned as I believe it is imperative that further actions related to teacher training and methodology be taken based on the answers to these two questions.

RQ 6 and 7 stem from the assumption that the availability of these technology enhanced tools does not automatically determine students to either use them or have very positive attitudes towards them. The answers to these two questions help me to further investigate the extent to which students feel motivated to learn vocabulary in English using these devices based on their attitudes.

All questions are answered using a parallel-mixed methods design with data from focus group interviews and the self-reported questionnaire.

## **1.5. Significance of the study**

This study can be considered significant for the following reasons. First of all, being a large scale study, its results could be generalizable across the population of high school students in Romania. This investigation is one of the first ones carried out in Romania.

Although there has been extensive global research on vocabulary learning strategies, I have not come across too much relevant empirical research on the digital tools students use to learn or consolidate vocabulary taking into account the gender, age, language program and academic profile variables. In this light, I believe the study is significant as little is known about how students perceive these digital learning tools and whether they incorporate them in their language learning. Given the fast pace of technological affordances, I believe it is necessary to pause for a moment and see how learners respond to these and how they use the available tools.

The results and discussion on the vocabulary learning strategies and digital tools students use are meant to move forward the way we research vocabulary learning strategies but also to re-conceptualize the way technology enhanced tools shape a new perspective on vocabulary learning. Some critical aspects related to the extent students want technology tools embedded in every aspect of their learning are also discussed.

## **1.6. Outline of the study**

This study has seven chapters. Chapter one presents the current situation of the research topic, the rationale and the significance of this study. Chapter two provides background information about the research context by focusing on a brief description of the Romanian education system, some particularities related to the linguistic context and also the role of English as a foreign language in students' language education.

Chapter three is a literature review. This chapter focuses on previous research and taxonomies related to language learning strategies and vocabulary learning strategies in particular. It also reviews studies focusing on the variables I have chosen for the current study. Secondly it explicates the concepts of computer and mobile assisted language learning and their implications for vocabulary learning and it describes several digital tools for vocabulary learning and consolidation. Moreover it also focuses on discussing studies which have investigated students' attitudes towards the use of technology in language learning.

Chapter four explains the methodology used in the study. It first presents the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which I based the current study. I also explicated in detail the rationale behind the choice of a mixed-methods design guided by a pragmatic approach. The chapter provides details about the sample population, the data collection instruments, procedures and analysis. It also addresses the issues of validity and reliability as well as the ethical dimension involved in the study.

The outcomes of my study are presented in chapter five which integrates the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data in order to answer the research questions. The most significant findings from both chapters are presented in the discussion chapter. This chapter discusses the most relevant findings and highlights the significance of those findings for the topic investigated. The conclusions chapter briefly summarizes the entire study, it indicates the implications, contributions and limitations of this study.

The study presented in this book investigated the vocabulary learning behavior of 1,239 high school students learning English as a foreign language in 9 Romanian schools. The research identified the vocabulary learning strategies used by students and focused on how the choice of vocabulary learning strategies varied across four independent variables: students' age, gender, academic profile and language program. Furthermore, the study examined the technology enhanced tools (computer and mobile assisted language learning tools) used by these students in their vocabulary learning as well as their attitudes towards using technology in vocabulary learning. The results made some important contributions to the field of vocabulary learning in a digital context enriching existing knowledge of the topic in a Romanian cultural context.



ISBN: 978-606-37-0256-3