Assessing Young Learners' Strategic L2 Vocabulary Learning in the Framework of Self-Regulation

Summary of PhD dissertation

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the importance of vocabulary learning has been recognized with the emphasis shifting to communicative language learning. The success of vocabulary learning, just like being successful in learning any other language feature, depends on a number of factors which regulate the process of learning a language. Among these factors, vocabulary learning strategies, metacognition, self-regulating capacity, motivation, and self-motivation are of crucial importance. All these factors can be identified as basic constituents of self-regulated language learning. The concept of self-regulation has been used recently instead of language learning strategies in order to eliminate conceptual ambiguity of the term and to describe the process of language learning more adequately (Dörnyei, 2009).

Although research on learning strategies dates back about thirty years, there is a lack of investigation of language learning strategies and vocabulary learning strategies used by young learners (henceforth YLs). Most studies of second language learning strategies have focused on secondary school, college, or university students, and on adult language learners all over the world. Moreover, though, the broader frameworks of learning strategies and self-regulated learning have been discussed in Hungary by pedagogy and psychology experts concerning learning in general, these issues have not yet been broadly investigated or brought together in second language research. Published research on YLs' language learning strategies is limited to a few studies and self-regulated second language vocabulary learning has not been explored until now in Hungarian context. Therefore, in order to bridge this gap, young learners' self-regulated vocabulary (henceforth SRV) learning was the focus of the present dissertation.

2. Research goals and research questions

The goal of the present dissertation was to provide an overall picture of YLs' strategic vocabulary learning in a foreign language setting in the framework of self-regulation by highlighting age-related differences. The ultimate goal was to design an instrument that measures young learners' strategic vocabulary learning in the framework of self-regulated language learning and reflects its tentative constituents, which can contribute to the success or failure of vocabulary learning. To achieve this goal, first, strategies generally contributing to vocabulary learning were explored by the means of personal interviews and classroom observation in order to find out how strategic and self-regulated YLs were when learning

vocabulary, to outline the main categories of vocabulary learning, and to gather data for further research. Based on the qualitative data, as a result of the developing process, a quantitative instrument was designed to assess young learners' SRV learning. After the validation procedure, the instrument was used to outline how young learners belonging to different age groups learn vocabulary. The results were interpreted to provide a comprehensive view of young children's SRV learning in English as a foreign language in a Hungarian context.

The specific research goals and questions are presented in relation to the main phases of the research:

Research goals

Phase I: Eliciting, describing, and classifying young learners' strategies used for learning vocabulary in the framework of self-regulated learning behaviour

The main goal of this phase was to explore the extent to which YLs were strategic and self-regulated in vocabulary learning, and by gaining an initial insight into their learning behaviour to contribute to the further viability of the research. In this phase, qualitative data was collected by the means of personal interviews, and this data was corroborated by classroom observation and supplemented with life data. The data was described and classified to form the categories of young learners' SRV learning and to provide the basis for the quantitative instrument developed in Phase II.

Phase II: Creating and developing a quantitative instrument to research young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning

In this phase of the research the main focus was on creating, developing, and validating a quantitative questionnaire that was used in the last phase of the research to measure age-related differences in the use of YLs' vocabulary learning strategies and self-regulation. First, a questionnaire was constructed based on the qualitative data, which allowed for collecting structured information on young learners' SRV learning, and then the structured questionnaire was validated by a focus group interview. The goal of collecting structured data was to formulate the statements of a Likert-type rating scale relying on YLs' utterances about their

strategic vocabulary learning. The rating scale was a quantitative questionnaire that was constructed to collect quantifiable data. Finally, the scale was piloted in this phase in order to ensure its reliability and validity, and to gain initial quantitative data on young learners' SRV learning. An ultimate goal of the piloting procedure in the second phase was to come up with a research instrument that can be used for further research purposes.

Phase III: Measuring young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning and age-related differences by using the quantitative instrument

The main goal of this phase was to explore age-related characteristics of and differences in strategic vocabulary learning and to find explanations for the tendencies emerging across ages. In this phase of the research the quantitative instrument developed in the previous phase was applied to assess YLs' strategies based on the categories of self-regulated vocabulary learning.

Research questions

The research questions were formulated to serve the basic goals of exploring what young learners do when learning vocabulary, and describing the characteristics of young learners' SRV learning. The research questions were connected to the main phases of the research, although further issues were addressed in some parts of the research.

1. Based on the theoretical framework, what kinds of strategies and self-regulated behavior are reported and demonstrated by young learners in learning vocabulary?

2. Based on the qualitative data collected in the first phase of the research, to what extent can a quantitative research instrument be developed which adequately reflects the underlying qualitative categories emerged, and which young learners of various ages are able to effectively use?

3. Based on the quantitative instrument developed in the second phase of the research, what patterns of young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning are revealed in a large-scale investigation within and across age groups?

3. Methodology

The participants, the settings, and the procedures are described here from a general perspective, since these variables have been adjusted to the special conditions in the different parts of the research.

3.1 Participants and settings

Hungarian primary school children from grades 3 to 8 took part in each phase. Participation was voluntary throughout the research; learners who were willing to participate were chosen at random by their language teachers. All of the participants were learning English as a foreign language in a school setting. Children in each phase of the research were involved from three major age groups – grades 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8 – in order to cover the population of language learners in a primary school. The youngest age group whose vocabulary learning was investigated comprised third and fourth graders, because pupils in Hungary generally start learning a foreign language in these classes and because it was supposed that they had developed a certain level of metacognitive thinking and understanding that allowed them to verbalize their learning process. Age-related changes in metacognition, language awareness, and self-regulation provided a good opportunity for looking at the development of strategic vocabulary learning across ages.

The whole research was conducted in six elementary schools in Kecskemét, Hungary. The school management and the English teachers gave their consent to carry out the research. Children in all these schools were learning English as a foreign language and had different number of classes a week depending on whether they were specialised in learning English or not. Those who were specialised had 4 or 5 lessons, and who were not had 2 or 3 lessons a week. Anonymity was guaranteed throughout the research. Participants were informed about the primary purpose of data collecting. In the interview parts the participants' parents filled in a consent form and permitted their children's involvement. Learners' language attainment was not the criterion of selection, thus learners with different language abilities could participate in the research. Since my intention was to include a wide range of children in the investigation, the differences between the schools whose learners participated in the research ensured the diversity of data and helped create a comprehensive picture of young learners' SRV learning.

3.2 Procedures

Although the procedures for each phase of the research were different, the approach in which the whole investigation was carried out was built around the same principle. Before starting each part of the investigation participants were informed about the purpose and the procedure. Whereas all types of the interviews were conducted by the researcher, data collection with the questionnaires happened in the presence of the language teachers only. The teachers were thoroughly, both in writing and orally, informed about their task in advance. They were given a cover letter and were personally guided on the expected task.

Table 1 represents the most important characteristics of the research construct in order to help orientation between the phases and parts of the research.

Table 1: Summary of the methods used in the three phases of the research

	Phase I		**Phase II**		**Phase III**	
Part 1	Semi-structured interviews	n=27	Focus group interview	n=12	Main study (using the quantitative questionnaire)	n=331
			Structured interviews (creating the quantitative instrument)	n=12		
Part 2	Classroom observation and retrospective interviews	n=19	Pilot study (developing and testing the quantitative questionnaire)	n=80		

4. Results

Since the research construct presupposed connection between each part and each phase, the data which arose in the first part was complemented by the data gained in the further parts of the research, i.e. the findings of each phase regarding the three main goals were substantiated by the successive nature of the research. Due to this procedure not only the newly gained information became more refined but the procedure was validated. The main results were gained in the three main phases of the research.

(1) The first phase of the research aimed at describing young learners' SRV learning in general. The results indicate that the YLs used a large number of various strategies for learning vocabulary. These strategies showed clear patterns of the strategy use characteristic

of the young learners. They were motivated, used self-motivational strategies, vocabulary learning strategies, and metacognitive strategies, and employed their self-regulating capacity for learning words. The vocabulary learning strategies represented the groups of cognitive, memory, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). The YLs taking part in the investigation used different forms of repetition, and employed mechanical techniques to learn vocabulary. Besides cognitive strategies, they memorized vocabulary by grouping words, inferred meaning, employed mental pegs and used other forms of mental representations. They employed their teachers' help, asked their mates when they did not know something, and the youngest learned words together with their family members. One important finding in the interview and observation parts of the research indicates that YLs used the strategies in combination. It was found that mechanical techniques support the use of mental pegs, implying that the cognitively most demanding strategies rely on the use of cognitively shallower ones. It follows from this finding that cognitively shallower strategies are as important as cognitively more demanding ones since these strategies seem to complement each other. This finding is important because cognitively demanding strategies lead to higher retention in memory. As for the use of metacognitive strategies the results indicate that the YLs were aware of their vocabulary learning process, planned their vocabulary learning, sought practice opportunities, and used different types of dictionaries to check the meaning and linguistic features of words. The YLs participated in this research used self-regulating control mechanisms to learn vocabulary, which are essential to self-regulated language learning. They controlled their environment by organizing their surroundings, managed satiation by eliminating boredom, directed commitment to persuade themselves about the importance of learning, and controlled metacognition by preparing consciously for vocabulary learning. Besides some basic instrumental motivational factors, the YLs used self-motivational strategies for learning vocabulary. They considered themselves to be self-efficient and skilful in learning words and were satisfied with the way they learnt vocabulary. They used different self-rewarding strategies to facilitate their vocabulary learning and were able to lower their anxiety.

The strategy profile emerged in the first phase of the research shows that the YLs were motivated to learn vocabulary, used a wide range of strategies, employed self-regulating control mechanism, and were aware of their learning process, which implies that they were strategic and self-regulated language learners. These different aspects of vocabulary learning the YLs relied on justified the attempt to discuss strategic learning in the broader framework of self-regulation instead of focusing on a particular feature, such as vocabulary learning

strategies. Based on the relevance of the different aspects, the categories of self-regulated vocabulary learning were formulated in the first phase of the research.

(2) The categories outlined in the first phase served as a point of departure to broadening the construct of strategic vocabulary learning (Tseng et al., 2006). The quantitative questionnaire which was developed based on the qualitative data proved to be useful to confirm the construct of young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning. The strategies that behaved differently in the statistical analysis were found to be responsible for age-related differences. The overall reliability of the questionnaire improved and the reliability of the categories became acceptable in the main study by increasing the number of participants involved in the research. The results of the quantitative analysis clearly represented the tentative categories of young learners' SRV learning, implying the viability of the construct, i.e. it can be stated that the categories of vocabulary learning strategies, metacognition, motivation, self-motivation, and self-regulating capacity constitute young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning. The finding that the categories were significantly correlated with each other also supports the vitality of the construction.

Besides the vitality of the categories, another important result of the second phase of the dissertation was that the results of the pilot study fell in line with the results of the qualitative analysis. The results of the quantitative analysis support the reliability of qualitative data. A closer look into young learners' SRV learning based on the quantitative data also let us conclude that the YLs used a variety of strategies, controlled their activity, were aware of what they did to learn, and, thus, in general, they were strategic and self-regulated in vocabulary learning. All in all, the results also show that the participants representing the three age groups were able to make sense of the questions and could successfully fill in the questionnaire.

(3) The main goal of the last phase of the research was to explore and analyse age-related differences in self-regulated vocabulary learning by the means of the final quantitative instrument developed throughout the research. The final questionnaire reflected the categories of young learners' SRV learning and reliably measured the whole construct. Although the instrument can be used to measure a variety of aspects of strategic vocabulary learning, age-related differences between and within the age groups were the focus of this research.

Surprisingly, the youngest learners reported using the most strategies involved in the questionnaire for learning vocabulary, and they were the most motivated to learn. Moreover,

their self-regulating capacity and self-motivation were higher than the pupils' in the other two age groups. However, regarding the category of metacognition their scores were the lowest, but still above the mean of 2.5, and the mean differences between the age groups were not significant in this category. Since the learners in age group 1 had been learning English in the lower section of the primary school for some months or a year and some months and had only two or three lessons a week, they can be regarded as beginners. Being a beginner normally can be concomitant with being motivated, since in the first two years of language learning, in grades 3 and 4, teaching normally happens in a playful manner, the materials are interesting and colourful, and, thus, motivation can be maintained more easily than in the upper section. Moreover, learners who have been learning a foreign language in school setting for one or two years do not have much accumulated knowledge, i.e. the size of their vocabulary may be low because they had not learnt as many words as the older learners and this amount of vocabulary may be easier to recall suggesting that they can succeed more easily relying on their self-regulating capacity and self-motivation. The high level of motivation and self-regulating capacity of age group 1 can be further explained by the U-shaped pattern in language learning, which stands for more general learning processes. This pattern can provide an explanation for the relatively low level of strategic vocabulary learning of age group 2 and the slight increase in some of the categories in age group 3.

Relying on the quantitative data, significant differences were found in the individual strategy use of the age groups. Although the findings indicated some change in YLs' vocabulary learning, this change cannot be described as a permanent development in self-regulated vocabulary learning. However, there is a certain tendency in YLs' strategic vocabulary learning. Although this tendency can be captured in the use of a number of strategies, it can be best illustrated in the use of the social strategy of asking for help in vocabulary learning. While the youngest learners relied on someone's assistance when learning new words, no one helped older students, implying that beginners were given some help, but more advanced learners succeeded alone. Another explanation for the youngest employing social strategies can emphasize the external assistance needed to the development of learning how to learn. Since learners in average primary schools in Hungary start learning a foreign language in grade 3 this is the time to shape their language learning behaviour and both teachers and parents may regard it their duty to help the youngest learners in learning vocabulary. It is also possible that the older and more experienced learners were just left alone with learning the language, which can be a result of various things. However, they may need a

new kind of support they do not get, such as help in using the words in context, i.e. meaningful communication with somebody.

Significant differences were found in the use of the self-motivational strategy which explored efficacy in vocabulary learning, indicating that the learners in age group 1 intended to learn more and revised words more often to make their learning more efficient. However, this finding and that learners in age groups 2 and 3 were generally the less self-regulated can be explained by the huge changes in the development and proficiency which create different context for vocabulary learning. It is also possible that the youngest learners' need for accepting and going along teachers' rules determine their learning behaviour, and this is reflected in their self-report of learning efficacy.

All in all, the results indicate that the participants were strategic and self-regulated in vocabulary learning. They reported and in the successive parts of the research confirmed the use of a number of strategies which were characteristic of their vocabulary learning, and which represented the main categories of self-regulated vocabulary learning. The final quantitative instrument proved to be appropriate for measuring self-regulated vocabulary learning and its different aspects. The specific focus in the present dissertation was on age-related differences, which highlighted some prevailing tendencies in young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning.

5. Summary and conclusion

In this dissertation I investigated young learners' strategic vocabulary learning in the framework of self-regulation, which is a relatively new trend in the study of second language acquisition. The target population of the research was YLs, whose self-regulated vocabulary learning process has not yet been investigated in the Hungarian context. Self-regulation provided a rich theoretical ground for the research. The research had various goals. The main goals were to assess young learners' strategic vocabulary learning, to establish the structure of self-regulated vocabulary learning, and to define age-related differences. Relying on the data gained by the qualitative research, a further goal was the creation and development of a quantitative instrument that was suitable to measure young learners' strategic vocabulary learning adequately. To satisfy these goals the research was built up systematically to ascertain the feasibility of each part. Different data collecting techniques were applied, such as semi-structured, focus group, retrospective and structured interviews, classroom observation, and Likert-type questionnaires, in order to gain reliable data and increase the

validity of the research. The quantitative research was strongly based on the results of the qualitative research parts. The combination of data collecting methods built upon each other ensured consistent and abundant data.

Strategies were investigated in the framework of self-regulation, and were restricted to the items of strategic learning participants reported using in the course of vocabulary learning. The strategies were grouped in the main categories of self-regulated language learning representing motivation, self-motivation, vocabulary learning strategies, metacognition, and self-regulating capacity. Attempting to typify the underlying categories of young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning, the dissertation aimed to provide a comprehensive view about the strategic behaviour of YLs in learning vocabulary in English as a foreign language setting in Hungary.

The most important contribution that this dissertation can offer to international research on second language acquisition is the profile of Hungarian language learners' strategic thinking in the particular field of vocabulary learning. Another significant contribution of the research is to add on the knowledge of young learners' language learning process, which still seems to be a relatively undervalued field in both Hungarian and international SLA context. Since the Hungarian pupils' vocabulary learning was investigated from the perspective of self-regulation, by providing an outline the present dissertation contributes to the understanding of its primary constituents. The structure of young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning characterizes the most important aspects of the vocabulary learning process. Getting insight into the micro structure of strategic learning the findings highlighted that Hungarian learners' employ a wide variety of strategies to learn vocabulary and their strategic behaviour changes with age. The age-related differences found in YLs' SRV learning contribute to the better understanding of the language learning process in general. The significance of finding age-related differences resides in the discovery that the youngest learners who had started to learn English not long before were the most strategic in vocabulary learning, implying that the conditions of self-regulated learning develop right at the beginning of learning a new language. Another important contribution to the research on young learners' vocabulary learning is the quantitative instrument that was created and developed in the dissertation. It may come in useful to measure young learners' strategic vocabulary learning in other language learning contexts, giving scope for international comparisons in self-regulated vocabulary learning.

I have written this dissertation in the hope that having outlined the strategy profile of Hungarian young learners' self-regulated vocabulary learning and the most important age related differences in this process, the outcome of the research will have wider implications. I am hopeful that the research will contribute to the field of second language acquisition and provide useful guidance to professionals. Foreign language teachers and teacher trainers can generate discussions proceeding from the results for the benefit of language learners.

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