Transitioning between a high school student and an English major: A retrospective study of strategic learning

Jakub Bielak

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Kalisz), Poland

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY IN POZNAŃ

Situating Strategy Use 3: Stepping Into a New Era of Strategy Research and Practice

Osaka, Japan, 13-15 October 2019

Transition b/w high school and university

- The first year at university is critical (Reason et al., 2006)
- What makes the transition difficult: student expectations vs. university experience vs. university teachers' views (Brinkworth et al., 2009)
- Transition problems: less feedback (Hanna et al. 2014), heavy workload and need to apply time-management strategies (Macaro & Wingate, 2004)
- Transition problems of language majors:
  - ✓ Grammar (Macaro & Wingate, 2004)
  - ✓ Reading literature/ longer texts (Gallagher-Brett, 2006; Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011)
  - ✓ Intimidation by TL-medium content courses (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011)

Transitions and strategic learning

- Learning strategies and self-regulation increase in successful students over time, especially the "deep" strategies (Coertjens et al., 2013)
- Transitions between educational stages are associated with changing strategy use, which is mediated by IDs (ability, motivation) (Huang, 2018)
- Strategies required in new contexts may have to be taught (Huang, 2018)
- Transition between China and Britain (Gao, 2006), between mainland China and Hong Kong (Gao, 2007) but also between (high) school and university
- Gao's (2006, 2007, 2008) studies adopted a socio-cultural perspective

Socio-cultural approach to strategic learning

- The setting is crucial for understanding action within it (Gao, 2006; Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Niu et al., 2018; Wenden, 1998)

- Employed especially to research learning in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts

- Language learning and strategizing are mediated by learning communities through their
  - ✓ Discourses = Motivation
  - ✓ Objects = Assessments
  - ✓ Significant individuals = Teachers and other language experts (Donato & MacCormick, 1994; Gao, 2006, 2008)

Research aim and participants

- Investigation of the transition with respect to
  - ✓ Strategic learning of English
  - ✓ Other related factors
  mostly with recourse to retrospective self-reporting
- 27 year-1 English majors at a Polish university (B2 level)
- 4 university teachers of EFL

Instruments and procedure

- Online school and university strategy survey (*n* = 27)
  - ✓ List and describe up to 5 English learning strategies that you use(d) the most often: (a) when you were in high school (b) now, at university
  - ✓ A short narrative about strategizing in the two contexts
- Semi-structured interviews with learners (*n* = 12) and their current (university) EFL teachers (*n* = 4)
- Final EFL exam grades
- Time: end of the second semester

Results ➡

Strategies recommended by teachers (%)
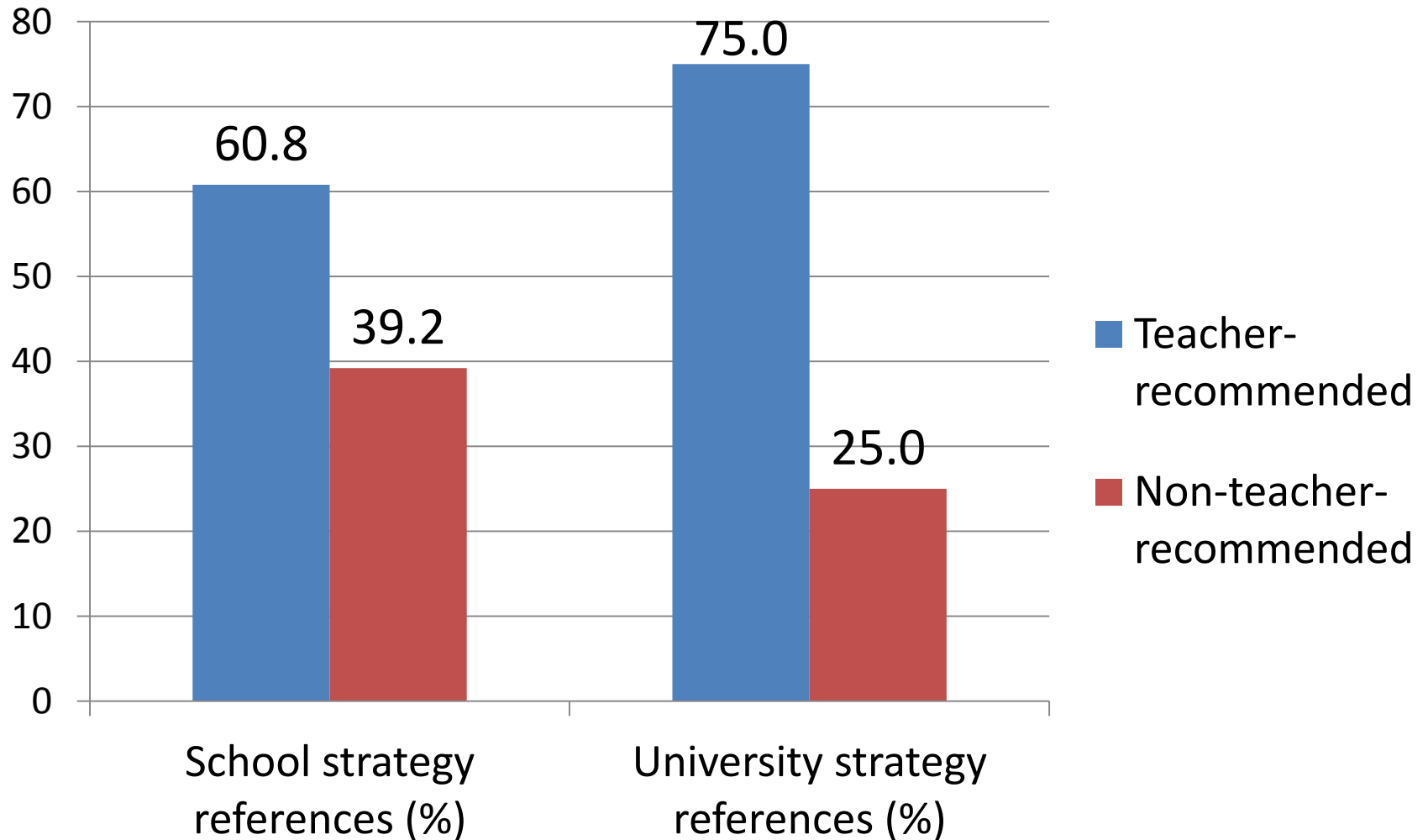
Strategies	School		University	
	No.	%	No.	%
Input	**55**	**35.3**	**31**	**24.8**
Vocabulary	**44**	**28.2**	**26**	**20.8**
Talking	**23**	**14.7**	**13**	**10.4**
Pronunciation	**9**	**5.77**	**19**	**15.2**
Grammar	**7**	**4.5**	**11**	**8.8**
General: Exercises, notes	5	3.2	7	5.6
Writing	2	1.3	3	2.4
Memorization	2	1.3	3	2.4
Learning together	1	0.6	3	2.4
Extra classes	3	1.9	1	0.8
Paying attention in class	1	0.6	2	1.6
Translation	0	0.0	2	1.6
Singing	2	1.3	0	0
Meta-cognitive	1	0.6	1	0.8
Helping others	1	0.6	1	0.8
Culture	0	0	2	1.6

Strategies in the two contexts

Differences between strategies in the two contexts (%)
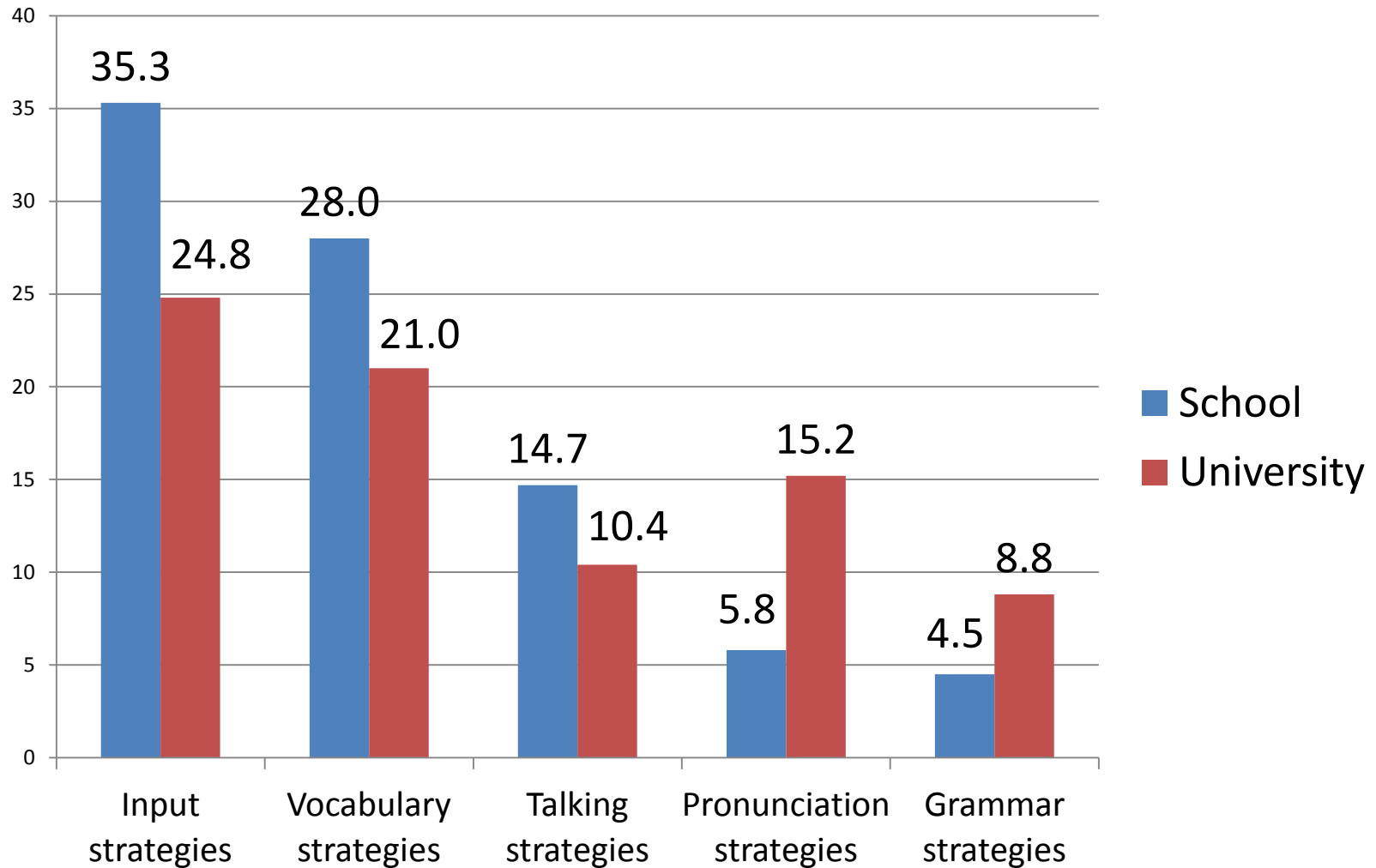
Patterns of individual strategizing in the two contexts

- Some change in strategizing, but the degree of change varied
- Change = enrichment
- Participants of low pre-university language ability
  - ✓ Considerable change (enrichment) in strategizing = final EFL exam success
  - ✓ Small change in strategizing = final EFL exam failure
- Participants of high/ very high pre-university language ability
  - ✓ Varied strategies at school and either considerable or small change = final EFL exam success

Motivation and individual strategizing in the two contexts

- A general shift in emphasis

School: INSTRUMENTAL (travel) and EXTRINSIC (grades) motivation

University: INTRINSIC (pleasure) and INTEGRATIVE (working abroad, interest in culture) (EXTRINSIC motives are still strong) with some traces of the IDEAL L2 SELF

- Both at school and university intrinsic and integrative motives associated with richer strategy repertoires

- Magda (M): Motivational shift (awakening)

EXTRINSIC → INTRINSIC and INTEGRATIVE

Motivation and individual strategizing in the two contexts (2)

- Magda: Sharp change in strategizing accompanying the motivational shift

M: *I learned mainly in class, and every now and then we took vocabulary quizzes so I would **study at home and then forget it** [laughter].*

I: *Cram, pass and forget, right?*

M: *Exactly.* (Interview, 6)

M: *I just started **to search for ways** [to learn] **which work for me** . . . because **previously I understood grammatical rules but I could not use them in conversation** . . . so I had to change my perspective to stop thinking in Polish and switch to the other language, so I started to get listening practice . . . books, full sentences I then had and not isolated words which I could not later use and insert into sentences, but I started to learn whole sentences, to think in this language even in everyday situations like I'm driving a car and: "If I were to come back home and describe what I have seen on my way, how would I say that?" Like **I put together** [descriptions/ sentences] **in my mind and this way I used to realize which words I still didn't know**, which words I had to look up when I would come home . . .* (Interv., 6)

Motivation and individual strategizing in the two contexts (3)

- Tomasz (T): Motivational plateau

EXTRINSIC ➡ EXTRINSIC and INSTRUMENTAL, and, discovering, INTRINSIC

I: *Why did you learn English at school, in the vocational high school?*

T: ***Because it was required*** *to move on to the next semester, and mainly to get credit and move on because* ***I mainly focused on other science subjects*** *and English was just required to pass.* (Interview, 11)

I: *Why did you choose the English major and why are you learning English?*

T: *I thought to myself:* ***Since I have vocational education, I will couple it with language, this will be some kind of a bonus****, all the more so because* ***my father imports cars from the States*** *and so he also needed a person who could help him to communicate language-wise with dealers.* (Interv., 11)

- Tomasz: Little change in strategizing accompanying the motivational plateau

At school mostly "free" input strategies and

> *Learning the rules of grammar by multiple repetition of the same sentences and examples until satisfactory results. Mainly at home.*

> *. . . like in maths . . . sentences were taken down, I considered it as a pattern and then found some relationships, . . . in this kind of an analytical way.* (Interview, 11)

He uses this strategy even more often at university because, he says,

> *I know this way of learning the rules of grammar the best and it is certain. I don't know any other way of learning grammar rules.* (11)

> *Oh my, a lot has changed because of university study . . . First of all I think one should not translate in one's mind for example from Polish into English and then speak, I think the key is thinking in the language you want to speak . . . In the way of learning grammar nothing has changed, still these patterns.* (Interview, 11)

> *. . . I understand everything but the order of sentences* [syntax] *. . . is the problem, only this, the rest* [listening, reading] *is OK. . . .* (Interview, 11)

Socio-cultural perspective on strategic learning

Tasks, activities, tests, and inherent strategies; and the Internet

Objects

Discourses

Agents
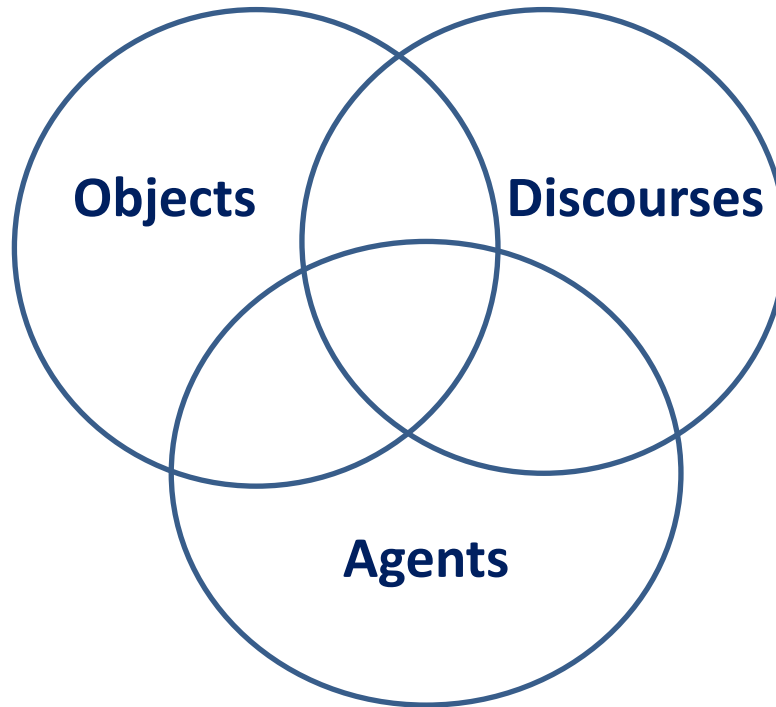
Views about English

Teachers, peers and relatives

Discussion

- Transition between a high school student (a communicator) and an English major (a budding English master) is associated with changes in strategizing (Huang, 2018)
- Strategizing at university is more varied than at school
- The growing importance of grammar and pronunciation (accuracy) strategies (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011; Macaro & Wingate, 200)
- At university, strategies tend to be "deeper" (Coertjens et al., 2013)
- Meta-strategies, associated with intrinsic motives, were rarely reported (e.g., Huang, 2018; Vandergrift, 2005)
- Strategizing is mediated by IDs and multiple levels of the context (Huang, 2018)
- The teacher as an important mediator of strategizing, even more so at university, where peers also play a role
- Still a lot of room for high quality SI at university
- The transition takes time, probably more in the case of lower ability students, and with time they are becoming better strategizers

Implications, conclusions, limitations, directions

- The need to improve SI at university
- The need to clearly communicate to students the teaching goal and juxtapose it with the learning goal
- Other ways of facilitating the transition?
- The usefulness of the socio-cultural approach
- Continuation of the study to turn it into a longitudinal one
- Micro-perspective research needed to complement the macro perspective