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Understanding academic transition and self-regulation: a case study of English majors in China

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This qualitative study explores how English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners (i.e., English majors in China) develop their self-regulated learning (SRL) abilities during their academic transition to university. The reflections and interview responses of four Chinese university EFL majors collected over one year were qualitatively analyzed. The results show that the English major students' use of SRL was externally driven by their negative experiences with learning during their academic transition. Over the year, the students also continued to harness their self-agency to refine their transition strategies constantly and dynamically by developing clear goals and effective tactics. The study concludes that during their academic transition, the EFL students' self-regulation processes were complicated rather than linear. The results of this study can aid academically transitioning students in overcoming potential obstacles during their transition to university.

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Introduction

The transition from high school to university is challenging for students, as it requires them to acclimatize to their new environment at various levels, such as emotionally and academically (De Clercq et al., 2018). A transitional process typically includes four stages that occur sequentially: preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization (Nicholson and West, 1995). For example, Coertjens et al. (2017) defined an academic transition as “any major changes in students’ role requirements or study context” (p. 359). In other words, the academic transition can be seen as a process that students undergo when they wade through different academic requirements in a new context (e.g., when moving from high school to university).

To adapt academically to university, students must become familiar with diverse learning strategies that allow them to navigate their learning strategically and independently (Bowman, 2017; Gale and Parker, 2014; Hussey and Smith, 2010). Such strategies are important because, at university, the time for in-class learning is limited, the knowledge delivered is more profound, and the workload assigned is more demanding (Bowman, 2017). Among these strategies is self-regulated learning (SRL), which is “learning that results from students’ self-generated thoughts and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of their learning goals” (Schunk, 2001, p. 125). Students participate in SRL by assessing what they know, determining what they should acquire, selecting learning strategies, and employing those strategies. This strategy is commonly used throughout the whole learning process, including before (e.g., goal setting), during (e.g., attention focusing and self-monitoring), and after (e.g., self-reflection) student learning. In other words, SRL is centered on students’ exploration of their own needs and challenges at the academic level, which they address with their own self-agency by seeking solutions (Gan et al., 2020). Apparently, gaining the skills necessary to engage in SRL can be an optimal way for students to prepare themselves for the academic transition to university.

While studies on SRL are abundant, researchers have either viewed it as an aptitude that is constant in individuals (Winne and Perry, 2000; Zimmerman, 2008) or have focused on the quantitative measurement of the relationship between students’ learning behaviors (which includes SRL) and their academic performance (Lynch and Dembo, 2004; Reaser et al., 2007). What has been scarcely mentioned is how students develop SRL during academic transitions and, especially, how complex this process is. Given the aforementioned importance of SRL, it would be worthwhile to gain a nuanced understanding of this topic, unpacking the details or evolution of a particular phenomenon in a specific context.

Meanwhile, what has been particularly under-researched is the relationship between the academic transition to university and the practice of SRL by EFL learners, of whom there is a large number worldwide. Indeed, EFL students, for example, those from China, who make up a significant part of the international higher education population (Wu, 2001), seem to have been neglected by researchers. Hence, an international perspective on this research topic is needed (Coertjens et al., 2017; Fryer, 2017; Terpstra-Tong and Ahmad, 2018).

Taken together, the current study aims to gain a qualitative understanding of the evaluation of EFL learners’ SRL development in relation to their academic transition to university. One aim of the paper is to provide suggestions to educators on how to better help with EFL students’ academic transition to university. The paper also aims to help policymakers in the English departments of universities, as well as parents, better understand the conditions and needs of transitioning students so that these needs will be properly addressed.

Literature review

Academic transitions and EFL learners. At the threshold of higher education, freshmen undergo various changes in terms of their interpersonal relationships, learning subjects, and living environments, which force these students to adjust throughout the process of academic transition (De Clercq et al., 2018). In most existing research, a transition is regarded as “a particular time of crisis” (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 744) in which students are faced with different obstacles, such as a lack of guidance and direction from tutors and institutions (Blair, 2017; Huang and Li, 2010; Malinga-Musamba, 2014; Trautwein and Bosse, 2017; Wahleithner, 2020), lack of time-management skills (Terpstra-Tong and Ahmad, 2018; Van der Zanden et al., 2018), inadequate English proficiency (Terpstra-Tong and Ahmad, 2018), and lack of social support (Friedlander et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Considering the large number of obstacles freshmen experience, research on this topic is needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of this academic transition and to recommend the necessary support needed by various students. Much research has investigated the academic transitions of freshmen majoring in various subjects, but the majority have focused on social science (e.g., Blair, 2017; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Clark, 2005; Gall et al., 2000). Of all the different subjects, EFL is another prominent topic that has been studied from various perspectives. For example, some studies have paid attention to changes in motivation for language learning (Courtney, 2017; Macaro and Wingate, 2004; Woodrow, 2013), changes in learner identities (Schwartz, 2012), and foreign language classroom anxiety (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2014; Woodrow, 2006).

Some Chinese researchers have also started to realize the importance of the research topic, but have mainly focused on students’ transition to university in a broad sense (Huang and Li, 2010; Meng et al., 2014; Song, 2018; Yang and Mao, 2013). Chinese EFL learners’ academic transition to university, however, remains under-researched, with only limited aspects of the experience being considered, such as changes in learners’ identities (Peng, 2011; Zhan and Wan, 2015) and changes in learning and teaching practices (Li et al., 2020). Therefore, this study on EFL learners’ academic transition can contribute to a deeper understanding of EFL teaching, both in China and across the world.

SRL in relation to academic transition. Most previous studies on SRL have been quantitative and have not depicted the process of SRL development during academic transitions (Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Brinkworth et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Fabry and Giesler, 2012; Nicol, 2009). They have merely demonstrated that self-regulating university students tend to complete their academic transition from high school smoothly and with high academic achievement (Heikkilä and Lonka, 2006; Vrugt and Oort, 2008). The study subjects had primarily been university students majoring in various subjects, mostly in the social sciences (e.g., Blair, 2017; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Clark, 2005; Gall et al., 2000). For example, Heikkilä and Lonka (2006) randomly selected 336 students of different subjects from the University of Helsinki and asked them to answer a questionnaire on learning approaches, self-regulation, and cognitive strategies to examine whether the three aspects are closely related and to determine the factors required for academic success.

In comparison, EFL learners’ SRL development during their transition from high school to university is an under-researched field. The limited quantitative studies on this topic have focused on the relationship between EFL learners’ self-regulation skills and English proficiency and have confirmed the significance of

developing EFL learners’ SRL capacities (e.g., Choi et al., 2018; Fukuda, 2018). Several quantitative researchers around the world have found that SRL could predict students’ foreign language development and their performance (e.g., Seker, 2016; Shing and Rameli, 2020). All of these quantitative studies, which have occurred across multiple disciplines and have included a few quantitative studies in the field of EFL, have shown that SRL is a critical skill for ensuring the academic success of university students.

However, little is known about how university students develop SRL during a certain period (Bridges, 2011; Dinsmore et al., 2008; Schmitz, 2006), and even less is known about university EFL students, who constitute a huge proportion of language learners in the world. A possible reason for the scarcity of research on the development of SRL skills is that previous studies have treated SRL as a natural aptitude—that is, as given and static (Winne and Perry, 2000; Zimmerman, 2008).

Dinsmore et al. (2008) noted that SRL involves a long-term development process and calls for investigating SRL not as given and static but as the product of a developmental process. Bowman (2017) and Cameron and Rideout (2022) also implied the same when they pointed out that peers are an influential factor in SRL development, although whether this factor facilitates or hinders students’ SRL development in the context of China is still underexplored. This developmental perspective on the role of SRL in academic transitions should be further investigated to reveal the complexity of its pattern.

Given the limited number of studies on the topic, this study aims to fill the gap and explore the SRL development patterns among academically transitioning university EFL students over a one-year period. This study was guided by the following research question:

How do university EFL students harness their SRL skills throughout their year-long academic transition?

By answering this question, this study hopes to help both students and teachers gain an in-depth understanding of university EFL students’ development of SRL skills during their year-long academic transition. The hope is that such an understanding will help teachers, administrators, and parents engage in useful practices to help students develop SRL skills that assist them in their transition.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study approach, as the flexible use of data sources afforded by this approach can reveal the complexity of and offer in-depth insights into a phenomenon in a given context (Baškarada, 2014). This function is aligned with the purpose of this study, which was to unearth the complex patterns of SRL development in university EFL students during their one-year transition to university. Indeed, conducting a qualitative case study is convenient in a particular research context, especially during current and future pandemics. In addition, a qualitative study approach, as Clark (2005) noted, is a dynamic perspective that is useful in “addressing how students experience, perceive, and subsequently manage ... various and varying influences” (p. 296). For example, because goal setting is a vital part of the SRL development process (Zimmerman, 1998), a qualitative perspective may provide detailed insights into how students establish, pursue, and adjust certain goals. Therefore, using a qualitative case study is optimal to further our understanding of this research topic, which has primarily been conducted using a quantitative approach and has not given sufficient attention to the evolution of students’ self-regulation in relation to their academic transition (e.g., Cameron and Rideout, 2022; Coertjens et al., 2017).

Research context. This study was conducted in the English department of a top Chinese university renowned for its instruction in foreign languages. Most students in the department, including EFL students, shared experiences of English learning. Before attending university, the students learned English mainly to pass the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (Hu and Wu, 2019).

The National Higher Education Entrance Examination has three compulsory subjects (Chinese, mathematics, and English) and several optional subjects (Hu and Wu, 2019). From the optional subjects, students can choose between a liberal arts track (geography, history, and politics) and a science track (biology, chemistry, and physics) (Hu and Wu, 2019). Their tracks determine their majors at university because “the liberal arts track students can only choose liberal arts-related majors while the science track students can only choose STEM-related majors” (Hu and Wu, 2019, p. 8; STEM refers to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Thus, their language classes in high school were highly examination-oriented, focusing on English at the lexical, collocational, and grammatical levels (Peng, 2011). However, it is possible that students with specific talents could be recommended to universities.

In contrast, the university department offers students a series of classes that include core academic skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and specific courses in the social sciences (e.g., sociology and linguistics). The classes and courses are all centered on particular subjects, and communicative competence is built through the process of learning about specific topics. Therefore, the academic transition from high school to higher education is critical, as the students’ pre-university English learning was language-based, whereas, in university, it is content-based. Such a change in teaching content also means a change from a teacher-centered classroom, which is how high school lessons are often tackled, to a student-centered classroom (Peng, 2011), as oral involvement from students is necessary for university classes.

Participants. The participants in this study, who were recruited during the 2020–2021 academic year, were four females. They were first-year students in the English department of a Chinese university and were undergoing an academic transition (see Table 1 for their profile).

They were selected for convenience because they all accepted our invitation to participate in this study. Before entering university, English had been a required subject for these students every year since Grade 3. Given the aforementioned features of language classes in high schools, their language learning was highly regulated by teachers and often geared toward collective examinations. In other words, in high school, they found self-regulation unnecessary and thus seldom practiced it. As the students participated in the high school education system in mainland China, they had the usual English learning experience for that region. Furthermore, before university, they experienced the same “spoon-feeding” as opposed to a self-exploration-

Table 1 Participant profiles.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Prior experience with self-regulation	National higher education entrance examination
Sarah	Female	Nearly zero	Not Taken
Linda	Female	Very limited	Taken
Eve	Female	Much	Taken
Ann	Female	Nearly zero	Taken

focused learning style, which may be common among EFL students in many areas or countries (Abdel Razeq, 2014; Alrabai, 2017; Farahani, 2014; Nunan, 2002). In these ways, the selected participants were typical EFL students.

The four university students had different learning experiences as EFL learners due to the educational resources of their hometowns and the types of high schools they attended. Other than Sarah, all the participants took Chinese, mathematics, English, and humanities subjects on the Chinese university entrance exam, as did most liberal art-track students. Before entering university, Sarah (a pseudonym) was a student at a foreign language school. Because of her talents in English, she was admitted to this university through autonomous college admission, and her exams were set by the university. Linda and Eve (pseudonyms) are students from a prosperous city whose schools aim to develop students' all-around abilities in an atmosphere of freedom. In contrast, Ann (a pseudonym) attended a high school in north China, whose educational resources were limited and whose courses were teacher-centered. Therefore, the four study participants had diverse yet typical learning experiences as EFL learners, which helped us obtain a comprehensive understanding of the development patterns of SRL.

Data collection and analysis. The data were collected from the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The language used for conducting interviews and by students to write their reflective journals was Chinese, the student's first language. The entries in their reflective journals were based on the guiding questions about their recent learning experiences, which we provided to them. Each journal reflection contained 800 words, on average. Each time the students submitted their journals to us, we read them and formulated questions for the follow-up interviews, along with some basic questions about their recent studies. Throughout the semester, the students wrote four reflective journals that alternated with four interviews.

The interviews took place four times during the entire academic year: after the first half of the first semester, at the start of the second semester, after the first half of the second semester, and before the end of the second semester. These are critical times when students encountered academic challenges that help them develop SRL skills (Bowman, 2017). For example, after the first half of the first semester, the participants in this study took the first reading exam, for which they had to memorize, and they received their first grades about nine weeks into the semester. Challenges related to memorization and their exam feedback stimulated them to reflect on their learning experiences at university. At the start of the second semester, they had a heavier workload than in the first semester, which forced them to learn how to manage their new workloads. After the first half of the second semester, they had to take midterm exams in reading and speaking, for which they were more prepared than in the first semester and for which they showed more improvement. Finally, before the end of the second semester, close to the end of their first academic year, they had a better understanding of their transition process. Our initial interviews were about the participants' basic information and their learning experiences at the university to date. The initial interviews lasted 60–120 min, depending on the length of the participant's responses. The second, third, and fourth interviews, which lasted 45–75 min each, were about the participants' recent learning experiences.

All the data were transcribed when necessary and analyzed rigorously using inductive thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011). The first author read the transcripts multiple times before coding them. Preliminary codes were generated after persistent data interpretation, comparison, and selection. The codes were filtered

based on the research question. Some keywords and phrases (e.g., expanding learning content based on interests, providing more abstract guidance from university instructors, and actively communicating with instructors) were among the codes identified in this study. These codes appeared to form some common categories (e.g., differences between high school and university posing challenges for academic transition, frustrated use of SRL, and uncertainty and confusion about the future). These categories were reexamined until themes relevant to the research questions (e.g., the students actively preparing themselves to be self-regulated learners while overcoming challenges) emerged (see Table 2 for key categories, codes, and themes). The second author, who is a competent qualitative researcher, checked the analysis outcome and concurred with the results. The results were triangulated with the reflective journals as supporting evidence, thereby forming a comprehensive analysis. The second author, who is bilingual in Chinese and English, also discussed with the first author and affirmed the English-version excerpts (which were translated by the first author, whose original language was Chinese) used in the findings section.

Findings. The following four themes emerged in response to the two research questions on whether and how the students demonstrated that they were self-regulated learners: (1) the student's active preparation to become self-regulated learners while overcoming challenges, (2) the student's exploration of SRL strategies facilitated by their negative experiences, (3) the student's establishment of clear goals after encountering challenges and confusion, and (4) the student's continued efforts to explore how to be self-regulated learners at university. It must be noted that there were times when these four themes overlapped.

The Early Phase: being externally driven and challenged as self-regulated learners. Upon entering university, all four participants realized that they had to become self-regulated learners to adapt to such a freely inquisitive space (Category 1.1; Table 2). As Eve said in her journal, "You have to be self-regulated in such a place of freedom" because "you suddenly have a lot of time to decide which thing to do". Ann echoed Eve's reflection, "My first impression of the university is that there's a lot of freedom, which means that I can learn what I want after class. I couldn't imagine doing that in high school". The student's awareness of the freedom afforded by the university motivated them to be self-regulated learners. Considering that the EFL students had to strictly follow the learning material organized by teachers in preparation for the university entrance examination in high school, the freedom of the university environment offered them an opportunity to organize their leisure time to their taste and learn whatever they wanted. In other words, instead of becoming lax in their studies, they supported their university learning with self-regulation. This might have been partly due to the academic backgrounds of the students who entered the university with very competitive college entrance examination scores.

However, the students' practice of SRL was thwarted in several ways, and they identified time management and excessive workload as the major constraints experienced in their first year (Category 1.2, Table 2). For example, although their instructors required them to practice English listening on their own for at least 30 min every day for two semesters, Ann said in the interview, "I have free time only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but other assignments, preview work, and even work from [student] clubs take up too much time. I don't have enough time to listen". Their limited time and heavy workloads seemed to keep them from doing assignments that required self-regulation, such as listening practice.

Table 2 The sample analysis.

Theme	Category	Example quotation(s) from participants
1. Actively preparing themselves to be self-regulated learners while overcoming challenges	1.1 Awareness of the freedom offered by the university	"I suddenly realized that, unlike in high school, I enjoy so much leisure time" (Sarah's interview).
	1.2 Challenges with time management and excessive workloads	"Scheduling, time management, and taking multiple courses—each with their own amount of work—were my major challenges. I had to make up my mind about which part of which course I would finish today" (Linda's reflection).
	1.3 Constraints of the previous learning style	"In high school, I memorized a lot of material by simply reading the notes again. When the test came around, the material I had memorized would be there, and I'd do well. However, [this approach] is no longer applicable in university" (Ann's reflection).
	1.4 Employing personal agency to seek solutions	"I should do something on my own to get ahead of others. After the midterm exam, I thought of many methods to enhance my efficiency" (Linda's interview).
2. Exploration of SRL strategies facilitated by peer pressure	2.1 Assessment of one's own performance by comparison	"English is very different. Many people may already have a solid foundation before university. It is not a fair competition. I have to be aware of this gap" (Linda's interview).
	2.2 Exploration of SRL skills stimulated by peer pressure	"I wish I could do the midterm exam again. I would try to review what I did incorrectly and attempt extra practice questions. What I need is to alter my study methods and get back on track" (Sarah's reflection).
	2.3 Adoption of peers' SRL strategies	"I couldn't give a worse performance than hers, so I rehearsed my speech the night before" (Ann's interview).
	2.4 Anxiety as a byproduct	"I cannot deny that competition makes me nervous and anxious. I know it stimulates me to be better, but it really does lead to an unhealthy mental state" (Sarah's interview).
3. Clash between adopted strategies and goal setting	3.1 Not prepared for reduced contact and guidance from instructors	"In high school, teachers assisted you far more by setting deadlines, providing additional worksheets or exercises, and working through the process step-by-step. But in university, everything is done on your own; you have to organize your schedule by yourself" (Linda's reflection).
	3.2 Peer competition rather than collaboration	"When I encounter difficulties in my studies, I don't know if I can talk with my classmates" (Sarah's interview).
4. Goal reestablished to complement SRL	4.1 Reflection on one's learning goals	"I decided to adopt literature as my field of study. Even during my leisure time, I enjoy reading various novels" (Linda's interview).
	4.2 External factors contributing to goal setting	As for sociology, I thought I liked it, but the reality is that I couldn't remember the terminologies. I couldn't remember what the sociologist's name was or what their theory was, let alone use it to analyze real events" (Ann's interview).
	4.3 Internal factors contributing to goal setting	"As for international politics and the economy, I have a growing sense that it is nonsense. ... I didn't like it before, and that feeling hasn't changed. But I liked sociology in the past. Though I find it very difficult, I like it even more" (Sarah's interview).
	4.4 Failure in goal setting	"Journalism has always been a vague goal for me. I don't know what to do, and I'm afraid to figure out what I should do. Maybe I'm afraid to leave my comfort zone" (Eve's interview).

This is probably due to the constraints of the student's previous learning styles (Category 1.3, Table 2). Three of the students said that their high school experiences gave them no room for SRL because they had to follow their teachers' instructions. Comparing her high school with the university, Sarah said in the interview, "In high school, I maintained personal contact with my teachers. They gave me direct supervision and detailed instructions. I think that's why I always met deadlines at the time. But less guidance is provided for students now". The student's previous EFL learning styles were not appropriate for completing their university assignments, as many EFL courses required extensive reading of various materials after class. As Linda wrote in her reflection, "Without providing detailed guidance, instructors merely ask you to read various materials. It is time-consuming and even lacking in focus". Basically, university EFL learners gradually learned from the context rather than through direct uptake from their teachers. The transition to a self-

regulated mode of learning was thus hampered, since, as Linda said in the interview, "Most students have been accustomed to receiving precise requirements and detailed guidance from teachers". In other words, even in the context of SRL, the students, influenced by their previous EFL learning styles, still expected guidance on how to implement SRL, which was, unfortunately, unavailable.

When the students found themselves in scenarios in which they were caught between their need to be self-regulated and their failure to practice self-regulation, they galvanized their own agency to seek solutions (Category 1.4, Table 2). Their activation of their own agency seemed related to their goal of performing better academically than other students—a probable carryover of their common determination to excel in the college entrance examination, which they all mentioned repeatedly. Linda mentioned in her reflection that she thought she "should do something on her own to get ahead of others". For example, some

students actively sought help from instructors in learning self-regulation in the university context. Ann made active contact with her writing and reading instructors and developed an effective method of dealing with her “Chinglish” (slang for English influenced by Chinese), as she explained in her reflection:

My writing and reading instructors told me that I use Chinglish because I translate Chinese into English word for word. My primary solution now is to polish my words repeatedly. From now on, I will select all sentences translated word for word in my writing and correct them.

According to the assistance offered to Ann by her instructors, she actively corrected her problem of using Chinglish in her writing. In other words, in the face of external constraints to the students’ determination to be self-regulated, the students employed their self-agency by seeking solutions from the outside, such as through their instructors, and transitioning to SRL by adopting new learning methods independently. The students’ self-agency seemed to be an important factor in this, as it cemented the demand for the students to be self-regulated and removed the constraints on their practice of self-regulation. In addition, some students chose to seek help from their high school friends. For instance, Sarah coined the Chinese phrase “Yun Zi Xi” in her reflection to refer to the learning method that she and her friends adopted: “During my self-study time, my friends and I share an online conference room. We supervise and encourage each other”. Whether by seeking help from their university instructors or from their friends, the students took particular agentive measures to regulate themselves.

Continued exploration of SRL strategies from within and outside: the rise of peer pressure as a prominent facilitator. With continued exposure to the aforementioned context, the students were also driven by peer pressure to establish clear study goals and explore new learning methods on their own (Category 2.1, Table 2). In other words, by comparing their learning styles with those of their peers, as demonstrated in and out of class, they were able to assess their own performance. For example, Ann said in her interview, “I usually inquire about my classmates’ scores, ‘How about your exams?’ Their answers offer me a clear understanding of my position”. Based on the outcomes (especially the negative outcomes) of their self-assessments, they sought out SRL strategies to improve their learning performance (Category 2.2, Table 2). For example, Linda discussed in the interview about how she took the initiative to refine her speech (an oral presentation given in front of an audience) due to peer pressure:

I don’t feel comfortable when I show weakness in public. I need adequate preparation because it’s easy for me to become nervous on stage. I don’t like when I stammer in front of my classmates. ... Therefore, I made a detailed plan and gave myself enough time to prepare for it. I have to learn my speech by heart; I have to spend a lot of time on it.

In this sense, peer pressure forced Linda to develop a detailed plan suitable for helping her improve her speech.

In addition to facilitating their independent exploration of SRL, peer pressure stimulated the participants to adopt their peers’ SRL strategies (Category 2.3, Table 2). For instance, in preparation for her speech, Ann used the same method as her roommate to speak confidently and fluently. She stated in the interview:

Around one week before [my speech], I noticed that my roommate could already deliver her speech fluently ... with proper passion and decency. ... Then she said she would rehearse in the classroom where we have our speech classes, and I thought, no, no, no; I can’t give a worse performance

than hers. So, I’ll do that, too! So, I rehearsed my speech the night before.

Obviously, Ann was enacting her SRL skills. However, unlike Linda, she used strategies learned from her peers to improve her academic performance (i.e., in making a speech). This positive role of peer pressure in developing students’ SRL is understandable. One possible reason for this is that the students viewed their peers as competitors and wanted to earn a better grade. This point was clearly stated by Sarah in the interview, “If I get a bad grade, it means others got a better grade than me. This makes me anxious”.

It should be noted that the participants demonstrated individual differences in their responses to peer pressure. For example, Eve did not channel peer pressure in a way that supported her SRL. Instead, she said in the interview that peer pressure only increased her anxiety (Category 2.4, Table 2): “Peer pressure is negative to a large extent. That’s mainly because my roommates are good at studying, which puts me under great pressure.” One possible reason for the pressure she experienced is that she was trying to find meaning in life in her own way, as she added in the interview, “It doesn’t matter if you are better than others or not. The point is that there are different criteria for evaluating a person. I want to find out the true meaning of life”. In this sense, peer pressure only distracted her and even shook her faith in her worth as a college student.

Clash between strategies and goal setting: students’ failures in SRL. When the students were exploring suitable SRL strategies, they encountered obstacles that distracted them from pursuing their learning goals. Such failures are common when students experience a brand-new transition to university, as the reduced guidance from their university instructors (compared to their high school teachers) forces them to rely on their underdeveloped planning and regulating capacities; meanwhile, peer pressure, as mentioned, makes students less able to collaborate with their classmates (Category 3.1, Table 2). In other words, students may find it difficult to adopt applicable strategies without outside assistance. For example, Ann made a comprehensive plan for her first winter vacation at university, but the majority remained unfinished. As she said in the interview:

I couldn’t finish my daily plan. I had to postpone today’s plan to the next day, and then to the day after that. I was so busy that I couldn’t enjoy my life. I was indeed occupied and fulfilled, but I was not happy. I had to stay at home and preview every day.

Ann made a detailed plan to improve, but without a thorough understanding of her own abilities. Such a mismatch is understandable, as students seldom have opportunities to prepare their own learning schedules (Category 3.1, Table 2). As Ann explained in the interview, “In high school, my teachers even arranged our daily schedule, like when I had to finish certain exercises and a certain number of examination papers.” In other words, although universities provide students with unlimited opportunities to explore SRL, inadequate assistance from instructors makes this exploration challenging. “It is hard to think of a solution on your own. In high school, English teachers assign you various exercises. They say, ‘Follow the teacher, and you can get a good score on the university entrance exam’” (Interview with Sarah). As EFL learners for at least 12 years, the participants were accustomed to being assigned tasks and believed that the only way to achieve goals was to do what the teacher asked. Specifically, following their teachers’ instructions was especially important for EFL learners because English is a critical subject in the university entrance exam.

Similarly, after entering university, the students seldom received another form of outside assistance: peer collaboration (Category 3.2, Table 2). For one thing, the aforementioned peer pressure forced the participants to see other students as competitors rather than collaborators. The loneliness Sarah mentioned in her first reflection may be viewed as circumstantial evidence of this. She said in the reflection, “Unlike in high school, I do everything by myself in university. I go to the library alone. I go to the canteen alone”. In addition, collaboration similar to that experienced with their friends in high school became less possible because of the insuperable distance between students. For example, Linda mentioned in her reflection, “It is becoming increasingly difficult for my friends and I to supervise and encourage each other online”. This is mostly due to the varied curricula adopted by different universities, and Linda further commented, “Finding shared free time to study together is now difficult”.

Both kinds of failures revealed the students’ immature SRL capacities, which encouraged them to set goals and match those goals with SRL strategies. Furthermore, such failures may help students realize their lack of outside assistance to some extent, which may urge them to become self-regulated learners.

Complementing SRL: students’ re-establishment of learning goals. In tandem with the adopted learning strategies, the students also reset their learning goals as self-regulated learners. Their goal was mainly to determine which specialized courses they wanted to take and which careers they wanted to pursue (Category 4.1, Table 2). For example, Ann disclosed that she gave up both sociology and international politics and the economy as her specialized courses and chose literature instead. As she said in her reflection, “I decided to study literature; I love poetry”. The other three students also reflected on their learning goals, although they considered their initial course choices correct, as Linda said in her reflection: “Literature is what really interests me most”.

Their goal-setting also seemed to have been shaped by both internal and external factors. However, some students’ goal-setting was shaped predominantly by external factors (Category 4.2, Table 2). For example, Ann explained in the interview that her new learning goals were mostly related to her negative experiences:

I used to enjoy international politics and the economy. However, every time I read the assigned materials, I couldn’t understand what they were talking about. It was tough—extremely tough.

Based on the challenges and confusion that she experienced in the courses she had taken, she realized what course she really wanted to take; she decided to shift to English (i.e., literature). Recall from the section on the context that, in the English department, students had several areas to focus on (e.g., international relations, linguistics, sociology, and literature).

On the other hand, the other students’ goal setting was driven more by the interaction between both internal and external factors (Category 4.3, Table 2). For example, even though Sarah had difficulties in sociology, she said in the interview that she gained a growing self-awareness of her love for sociology:

As for international politics and the economy, I have a growing sense that it is nonsense. ... I didn’t like it before, and that feeling hasn’t changed. But I liked sociology in the past. Though I find it very difficult, I like it even more.

Sarah struggled with the tension between her external negative experiences and her realization of what was right for her, but the latter suppressed the impact of the former. The challenges she

did not deter her from learning actively. Instead, they gave her a comprehensive understanding of a particular specialized course, which increased her self-awareness and strengthened her faith.

The effectiveness of the students’ newly established goals was also reflected in their ongoing SRL. For example, once Linda had a clear goal of studying literature, reading alone became her daily source of relaxation. As she said in the interview:

Roughly every two days, I take some time to read. ... Because I read novels, it is definitely relaxing ... and it helps me a lot in literature lessons. I can easily understand a concept by associating it with what I have read. ... I like literature.

To reiterate, challenges and confusion helped the participants better understand their goals. This gave Linda a strong motivation to pursue what she wanted to learn. With such motivation, Linda was able to easily adopt a self-regulated attitude toward learning and then practiced SRL.

Similar to the factor of peer pressure, idiosyncratic differences in goal setting were also obvious. That is, some students did not have goals as clear as Ann’s and Sarah’s, even though they were in the same department (Category 4.4, Table 2). This is illustrated by Eve’s comment in the interview, “Journalism has always been a vague goal for me. I don’t know what to do, and I’m afraid to figure out what I should do. Maybe I am afraid to leave my comfort zone”. Eve might have felt this way because of the smaller number of challenges she experienced and her weaker self-awareness compared to her peers. Because she graduated from a first-rate high school, her English proficiency enabled her to handle various tasks successfully. However, this relative success hampered her self-reflection. As she said in the interview, “Sometimes, I realize that I don’t have a clear goal, but I am only 18. I have no need to be anxious”.

Discussion and implications

This study provides important insights into how EFL students experience their academic transition as transformation into self-regulated learners. Its two major findings are outlined below.

The first finding, which is related to the first research question, is that external negative experiences force EFL students to engage in SRL. In this study, the negative experiences faced by students who engaged in SRL included challenges regarding learning content and peer pressure. This finding echoes previous research on the external impact of students’ activation of SRL (e.g., Gale and Parker, 2014) and previous research on students’ demonstration of SRL in changing their learning strategies and developing better time-management skills during their academic transition (e.g., Bowman, 2017; Cameron and Rideout, 2022; Coertjens et al., 2017). However, previous research focusing on EFL learning in general (e.g., Choi et al., 2018; Fukuda, 2018; Shing and Rameli, 2020) or SRL in general (e.g., Bowman, 2017; Cameron and Rideout, 2022) has mainly used the quantitative approach to studying the implementation SRL (e.g., Brinkworth et al., 2009; Clark, 2005; Fabry and Giesler, 2012; Nicol, 2009). In contrast, by using the qualitative approach to focus on EFL students during their academic transition over one year, this paper outlines at length how the transitioning students encountered difficulties, tried solving them using various methods and found suitable solutions, during which time they gradually developed their SRL ability and became self-regulated learners. In other words, the findings also contribute to the literature on university EFL students’ activation of SRL by using a qualitative approach to provide a detailed understanding of this process.

Previous studies have found that support from peers plays a significant role in helping students overcome challenges faced in

their academic transition to university (Coertjens et al., 2017; Gall et al., 2000; Wilcox et al., 2005). While most previous research on peers has focused on the positive relationship between peer cooperation and SRL development, this paper focuses on the positive outcomes of peer pressure. Such pressure provided opportunities for three of our four participants to observe and imitate effective peer learners, which helped the participants improve their SRL skills. This unique focus on peer pressure and competition rather than on peer support may be a reflection of Chinese society, which is highly competitive due to the disparity between its relatively limited resources and its large population. In this way, this study enhances our understanding of EFL students' SRL development and, in particular, our understanding of the driving forces behind a lack of SRL capacities. In the process of transforming into self-regulated learners, the students faced inevitable academic challenges because of their unsuitable learning methods and poor time-management skills. However, such challenges stimulated most of the participants to develop their SRL skills and become self-regulated learners. Moreover, this study complements previous studies by Bowman (2017) and Cameron and Rideout (2022) by focusing on the context of education in China, in which peer pressure exerts a stronger influence than peer support.

The other main finding is that the phases experienced by the students during their transformation into self-regulated learners are not isolated and may co-exist. While Eve quickly adapted to university with her advanced SRL skills, she is still struggling to identify a clear goal. Such a contrast may indicate that transitions do not simply consist of preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization, as illustrated in the previous research (De Clercq et al., 2018; Nicholson and West, 1995); rather, the four transitional phases often occur at the same time, although certain phases may be dominant. In other words, the academic transition to SRL should be viewed from a non-linear multi-phase perspective. This finding aligns with the findings of studies in the field of education, which, for example, have shown that transition phases in the workplace "are more like curving, slanting, overlapping strata than like sequential stages" (Bridges, 2011, p. 100).

The findings in this study, which differ from those of previous studies on this same topic, may be ascribed to the different foci of the studies. Indeed, previous studies have focused on the transition to university in general (e.g., Coertjens et al., 2017), while this study centered on the transition to becoming a self-regulated learner, a transition involving various challenges that may involve students' multidimensional efforts to overcome them. In addition, having different educational backgrounds, the students in this study encountered different challenges on their path to SRL implementation, due to which the four phases may co-exist at the same time. From this viewpoint, this study complements previous studies by illustrating the complex, dynamic pattern of SRL development in the field of academic transitions. It also enhances our understanding of EFL students' SRL development and, particularly, of the complicated phases it involves.

This study has three main implications. First, a preparatory program for EFL students should be developed to provide necessary information about challenges they may encounter and corresponding suggestions to help them develop SRL skills. This program may enable students to prepare themselves for such challenges and thereby contribute to a less anxiety-filled start in their university life. Second, instructors should be aware of their own significance in smoothing the transition from high school to university. Unlike high school teachers, they can provide general guidance to help students gradually build SRL skills and become independent. Third, at the pre-tertiary EFL level, where knowledge delivery is more at the language level than at the content level (Peng, 2011), teachers may need to help EFL students become familiar with particular strategies to unpack content-based literacy at the university level. A genre-

based perspective on content literacy may be a good choice of strategy, as it enhances the understanding of literacy from a multilayered and transparent perspective (Dreyfus et al., 2015).

Limitations and recommendations

The important limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the participants were selected only for convenience. They were all female and from a prestigious foreign language university in China. Considering that individuals who struggle to enhance their SRL skills may also struggle to get approved for entry into these prestigious universities or be unable to remain in them once admitted, these participants cannot be considered representative of all students in the university and beyond. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all Chinese undergraduate EFL learners. Future research should examine a large cohort of both male and female participants. Future research should also use the qualitative study approach to track participants at the pre-tertiary levels or conduct longitudinal studies in and out of the field of EFL over a longer time so as to reveal the dynamics and complexity of the student's transition and self-regulation.

Data availability

Data can be shared on appropriate request.

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Author contributions

The first author was responsible for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. The second author was responsible for the design of the study and the critical review of the paper. The two authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All participants gave their informed written consent. The institution's ethics committee also gave permission to conduct the research.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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