

Exploring Expository Essay Writing Challenges and Coping Strategies: A Case Study of Two Chinese EFL Non-English Majors

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Abstract: *This qualitative case study examines the expository essay writing challenges and coping strategies of two Chinese non-English major undergraduates learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Through think-aloud protocols, retrospective interviews, and writing samples, the study identifies key linguistic, cognitive, and psychological barriers, including limited vocabulary precision, grammatical errors, translation interference, and writing anxiety. Despite facing similar obstacles, the two participants adopted notably different strategies. Student A favoured risk-averse methods, such as sentence simplification, direct translation, and minimal revision, aiming to maintain fluency and reduce errors. In contrast, Student B employed more metacognitively driven strategies, including detailed outlining, extensive revision, and emotional regulation techniques like task segmentation and positive self-talk. These findings highlight the critical role of metacognitive awareness and psychological resilience in effective EFL writing. The study advocates for pedagogical approaches that support diverse learner profiles by combining explicit instruction in metacognitive and affective strategies with the encouragement of reflective revision practices. By focusing on individual variation, this research offers valuable insights for improving EFL writing instruction among non-English majors in China.*

Keywords: Expository writing, writing challenges, coping strategies, EFL non-English majors, China

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

China hosts over 400 million English language learners, with university students, particularly non-English majors, forming a significant group, having 9–12 years of prior English education (Han, 2021; Wei & Su, 2012). Despite extensive study, many struggle with English writing, especially expository essays, due to limited authentic language use and interaction with native speakers, leading to low motivation and interest (Zhao, 2012). Non-English majors often lack awareness of effective writing processes, conventions, and strategies for coherent essays (Xiao, 2007). The College English Test Band Four (CET-4), mandatory for non-English majors, includes a challenging writing section requiring a 120–150 word expository essay in 30 minutes, accounting for 15% of the score (Zhao, 2012). Many students underperform, averaging 6% of possible marks, prioritizing vocabulary and grammar over content, coherence, and clarity (Meng, 2011; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Xiao, 2008). This study explores the

challenges non-English major undergraduates face in expository writing and the strategies they employ to improve CET-4 writing performance.

Research Problem

Studies on Chinese EFL learners' writing challenges highlight specific issues in the writing process. Xu and Qi (2017), Shen and Chen (2021), and Xu (2018) explored pauses, revisions, and cognitive difficulties in L2 writing, noting benefits of end-of-text revisions (Xu, 2018). Kao and Reynolds (2017) identified lexical knowledge gaps, while Huang (2005) and Hu (2022) examined linguistic challenges and strategies among high-proficiency English majors. However, these studies focus on isolated components like revision, neglecting broader processes such as planning and editing. Sang's (2017) synthesis of 29 studies linked undergraduates' writing difficulties to curriculum, tests, and limited language exposure. Yet, research often overlooks non-English majors, who struggle with expository essay writing due to poor application of knowledge and unawareness of writing strategies. This study addresses gaps in understanding their linguistic, psychological, and cognitive challenges to improve instructional practices and writing competence.

Research Purpose

This qualitative study investigates the expository essay writing challenges and coping strategies of two non-English major students at a Chinese applied university in an EFL context. It explores difficulties in idea generation, organization, vocabulary, coherence, and clarity, and examines strategies like brainstorming, outlining, revising, and self-assessment. By comparing the two cases, the study analyzes similarities and differences in their challenges and coping approaches. The findings aim to offer insights for educators and curriculum developers to create effective instructional methods to improve the writing competence of Chinese non-English major EFL learners.

Research Questions

- 1) What difficulties or challenges do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students experience during expository essay writing?
- 2) How do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students utilize coping strategies to address the challenges they encounter when writing expository essays?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study examines the writing challenges and coping mechanisms involved in expository essay writing. By analyzing prominent models within each domain, this study seeks to elucidate the interconnections between the various components. Specifically, it investigates the challenges these students encounter during writing and the mechanisms they use to overcome them.

2.1 Models of Writing Challenges

Writing is a complex skill that presents challenges for learners, especially second-language writers. Various models categorize these difficulties in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, planning, organization, mechanics, transcribing, and psychological factors.

Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) examined English writing challenges among university students, focusing on content and lexical aspects. Content issues included lack of ideas, difficulty organizing thoughts, and uncertainty about starting essays. Lexical challenges involved selecting appropriate vocabulary and forming grammatically correct sentences. They

found most students struggled with idea development and coherence, recommending curriculum alignment to enhance content knowledge and critical thinking. Alfaki (2015) identified writing problems among university English majors, including linguistic issues like grammar, sentence structure, word choice, and punctuation, as well as cognitive problems such as spelling and capitalization mistakes. Students also struggled with exploring content and organizing ideas, resulting in poorly structured essays. Recommended strategies included reading aloud, using dictionaries or spellcheckers, and extensive reading. Fareed et al. (2016) highlighted challenges faced by Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners, such as insufficient linguistic proficiency (grammar, syntax, vocabulary), writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1, and weak organizational structure. Contributing factors included untrained teachers, ineffective methods, limited practice, and large classes. Solutions suggested included better reading habits, vocabulary instruction, teacher training, and writing practice. Nurjanah (2018) investigated writing difficulties among high school students composing analytical exposition texts. Challenges included developing arguments, limited vocabulary, inappropriate opinions, and translation issues related to word choice, tense usage, and L1 interference. Students also struggled with language features like passive sentences and the simple present tense. The study suggested increased reading and focused teaching on passive voice and tense use. Elfa (2020) found college students faced problems in analytical exposition texts, including thesis writing, argument development, reiteration, language features (simple present tense, passive voice, conjunctions), vocabulary, and mechanics (punctuation, spelling, capitalization), leading to poor organization and communication. Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022) identified three main categories of difficulty for Indonesian EFL learners writing analytical exposition texts: cognitive (limited topic knowledge, structuring, mechanics), linguistic (vocabulary, grammar), and psychological (writer’s block, lack of motivation, copying, and sentence construction confusion).

Drawing on key features from Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Alfaki (2015), Fareed et al. (2016), Nurjanah (2018), Elfa (2020), and Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022), this study develops a comprehensive framework to analyze expository essay writing challenges faced by two Chinese non-English major students. Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) highlight issues with idea development, planning, and audience awareness. Alfaki (2015) emphasizes linguistic problems such as grammar and punctuation. Fareed et al. (2016) note limited writing practice, vocabulary issues, and poor coherence. Nurjanah (2018) focuses on organizing ideas logically and generating relevant content. Elfa (2020) addresses genre-specific challenges and low self-efficacy. Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022) identify cognitive, linguistic, and psychological barriers. These models collectively inform the integrated writing challenge model in Table 1, which serves as the analytical framework for examining the participants’ expository writing difficulties.

Table 1: Writing Challenges Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Vocabulary Challenges	Word Choice	Overuse of complex words affects clarity.
Grammar Challenges	General Errors	Issues with subject-verb agreement, pronouns, and sentence structure.
	Passive Voice	Confusion over structure and verb forms.
	Simple Present Tense	Errors in subject-verb agreement and passive sentence forms.
	Sentence Structure	Run-ons, fragments, and coordination issues.
Planning Challenges	Limited Topic Knowledge	Lack of ideas hinders writing.

	Idea Development	Weak vocabulary affects organization and coherence.
Writing Challenges	Starting Issues	Uncertainty in beginning and structuring writing.
	Thesis & Arguments	Struggles with topic introduction, argument development, and conclusions.
	Organization & Coherence	Problems with paragraph structure, transitions, and cohesion.
Mechanics Challenges	Capitalization & Punctuation	Errors in sentence capitalization and punctuation rules.
	Spelling	Struggles with English's inconsistent spelling rules.
Transcribing Challenges	Translation Issues	Difficulties in expressing ideas due to limited vocabulary
	L1 Interference	Dependence on native language affects writing quality.
Psychological Challenges	Anxiety & Lack of Interest	Mental tension and low motivation hinder writing.
	Laziness	Copying due to lack of confidence and effort.

2.2 Models of Coping Strategies

In EFL writing, learners often face challenges such as anxiety, grammatical errors, and difficulties in idea generation. Coping strategies help students manage these obstacles, reduce stress, and improve writing skills. Several models categorize the strategies learners use to address these difficulties.

Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) identified five coping strategies for managing language anxiety: Preparation (improving study habits), Relaxation (using techniques like deep breathing), Positive Thinking and Peer Seeking (reframing negative thoughts and seeking peer support), and Resignation (a passive response offering only temporary relief). Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) described coping strategies for writing problems, including Pre-writing (brainstorming, outlining, using a dictionary), Revising (focusing on grammar, spelling, ideas, coherence), and Seeking Help (visiting writing centers). Qashoa (2014) categorized writing anxiety alleviation strategies into Affective (building self-confidence, maintaining a positive attitude toward mistakes), Cognitive (practicing writing outside class, imitating model samples, expanding vocabulary, addressing grammar weaknesses), and Test-related (pre-test preparation, peer review, outlining, dividing prompts). Fareed et al. (2016) proposed remedies at individual and institutional levels. Individually, students should increase reading and writing exposure, practice daily, and avoid rote learning. Institutionally, they recommended skilled teachers, constructive feedback, curriculum changes, and writing competitions to motivate students. Zhang and Hasim (2023) identified strategies used by Chinese students in Malaysian universities, such as seeking help from teachers, peers, and workshops. They also highlighted using technology like audio recording apps and translation software to understand assignments and improve vocabulary. Reading and imitating academic papers, revising thoroughly, and ensuring quality work help bridge knowledge gaps and strengthen academic writing. Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) identified coping strategies for Indonesian EFL students facing grammar challenges. Manual strategies include reading research articles, studying conjunctions, learning spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and reading aloud to find errors. Automatic strategies involve using Grammarly, online monolingual dictionaries, and Microsoft Word's grammar and spell-check tools. These strategies improve sentence construction, mechanics, and grammatical accuracy, ultimately enhancing academic writing proficiency.

Drawing on key features from Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004), Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Qashoa (2014), Fareed et al. (2016), Zhang and Hasim (2023), and Asnas and Hidayanti (2024), this study develops a comprehensive framework to analyze the expository essay writing coping strategies of two Chinese non-English major students. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) identify

anxiety-coping strategies like preparation and peer seeking. Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) emphasize institutional support, scaffolding, and feedback. Qashoa (2014) highlights motivational strategies such as persistence and self-efficacy. Fareed et al. (2016) focus on sociocultural and linguistic mechanisms, including translanguaging. Zhang and Hasim (2023) explore metacognitive and affective regulation like planning and emotional control. Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) stress collaborative and digital literacy strategies. These perspectives inform the integrated coping strategies model in Table 2, serving as the analytical framework for examining participants' writing approaches.

Table 2: Coping Strategies Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Preparation	Reading	Writers read research articles to enhance grammar skills.
	Relearning	Writers revisit spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.
	Practice Writing	Writers practise writing outside the classroom.
	Imitating Samples	Writers emulate academic articles to improve writing.
Pre-Writing Activities	Brainstorming	Writers generate ideas before writing.
	Jotting Notes	Writers take notes in L1 before writing.
	Outlining	Writers create an outline before drafting.
Linguistic Enhancement	Vocabulary	Writers use notebooks to expand vocabulary.
	Grammar	Writers focus on common grammatical mistakes.
	Spelling	Writers identify and correct common spelling errors.
	Conjunctions	Writers study conjunction usage in academic texts.
Revising	Lexical Revision	Writers revise grammar, spelling, and language.
	Content Revision	Writers improve the content and ideas of their drafts.
Editing	Editing Work	Writers read aloud to check grammar and clarity.
Seeking Help	Writing Communities	Writers join online groups for writing practice.
	Teacher/Peer Help	Writers seek feedback from teachers and peers.
Using Technology	Translation Tools	Writers use translation software for understanding texts.
	Online Dictionary	Writers use monolingual dictionaries for vocabulary learning.
	Microsoft Word	Writers rely on spelling and grammar checks.
Psychological Strategies	Positive Attitude	Writers embrace mistakes as learning opportunities.
	Fluency Over Accuracy	Writers focus on fluency to reduce writing anxiety.
	Relaxation	Writers use deep breathing to stay calm.
	Self-Confidence	Writers develop confidence to manage writing anxiety.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the expository essay writing experiences of two Chinese non-English major students in tertiary education. It focuses on understanding the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms they employ during the writing process. The case study method is chosen for its strength in examining real-life contexts in depth, with two participants selected to provide rich, detailed insights into their individual experiences.

Participants

Two second-year, non-English major students, referred to by the pseudonyms Pearl and Lily, from a Chinese university, participated in the study. Selected for their intermediate English proficiency and willingness to share their writing experiences, they had prior exposure to

college-level writing through textbook-based training, helping them develop essential writing skills. Their preparation for the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), which includes a writing component, motivates them to practice writing and familiarize themselves with CET-4 composition types. This experience makes them ideal participants for the think-aloud technique, as their familiarity with CET-4 tasks allows them to effectively articulate their cognitive processes during writing.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a systematic and theory-driven thematic analysis to explore the writing challenges and coping strategies of non-English major students in second-language (L2) expository essay writing. Data sources included Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), retrospective interviews, and pre-task semi-structured interviews, all of which were transcribed and participant-verified. Detailed behavioral descriptions were constructed from these sources along with writing samples to identify instances of difficulty and the strategies participants used to address them. Guided by established frameworks (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006), the researcher conducted a theoretical thematic analysis involving coding, categorizing, and theme development, with a specific focus on recurring and individual-specific challenges as well as coping mechanisms. The coding process targeted key problem areas such as lexical choice, grammatical accuracy, organization, and task interpretation, while also capturing how participants responded to these difficulties. A comparative analysis highlighted both common and unique coping strategies, offering insights into the range and effectiveness of approaches used by learners to manage writing-related obstacles. Tables 3 and 4 present the coding system, including the main themes, categories, and illustrative data excerpts.

Table 3: Coding System of Qualitative Data: Writing Challenges

Theme	Code	Description	Data Example
Vocabulary Challenge	Word Choice Issues	Difficulty choosing precise or appropriate words.	Pearl used “happiness” instead of “welfare”; Lily said “raise volunteers” instead of “recruit.”
	Synonym Repetition	Over-reliance on basic vocabulary or unnatural synonyms.	Lily used “facilitate” to replace “help,” making her sentence sound awkward.
Grammar Challenge	Subject-Verb Agreement	Frequent issues with tense and agreement.	Pearl wrote “She go to school every day.”
	Sentence Structure	Simplistic or incorrect structures due to lack of grammar control.	Lily avoided passive voice, resulting in unnatural sentence structure.
Planning Challenge	Idea Development	Inability to expand on or elaborate ideas due to limited topic knowledge.	Pearl couldn’t develop the idea of elderly recreation; Lily repeated points with little insight.
	Structural Planning	Issues with organizing writing effectively.	Pearl began writing immediately and rearranged later; Lily made outlines first.
Writing Process	Starting Difficulties	Difficulty beginning essays or forming thesis statements.	Pearl used “Now, with the development of...” as a formulaic start; Lily used generic templates.
	Rewriting & Revising	Variation in revision strategies and depth of edits.	Pearl made minor edits; Lily rewrote entire paragraphs.
Mechanics Challenge	Spelling and Capitalization	Errors that hinder clarity and correctness.	Pearl misspelled “welfare”; Lily wrote “satable” instead of “stable.”
	Punctuation Errors	Misuse of commas or sentence-ending punctuation.	Lily created run-on sentences due to comma misuse.

Translation Challenge	L1 Interference	Reliance on Chinese affecting English fluency and phrasing.	Pearl translated “科技是第一生产力” to “Technology is the primary productive force.”
	Word-by-word Translation	Literal translations resulting in awkward phrasing.	Lily translated phrases word-for-word, leading to unnatural expression.
Psychological Challenge	Writing Anxiety	Emotional barriers such as stress, lack of confidence, or frustration during writing.	Pearl sighed in frustration when stuck; Lily avoided complex words due to anxiety.
	Motivation & Confidence	Differences in emotional response to challenge.	Pearl showed self-doubt; Lily used breathing and broke tasks down to cope.

Table 4: Coding System of Qualitative Data: Coping strategies

Theme	Code	Description	Data Example
Preparation	Reading	Reading to absorb structures and vocabulary.	Lily read model essays to understand formal sentence structure.
	Relearning	Reviewing previously learned concepts before writing.	Pearl reviewed grammar rules before drafting.
	Practice Writing	Engaging in additional writing exercises to build fluency.	Lily rewrote essays for practice before tests.
	Imitating Model Samples	Using example essays as models for structure and vocabulary.	Pearl used phrases from model answers like “With the development of society...”
Pre-writing Activities	Brainstorming	Generating ideas before writing.	Pearl brainstormed in Chinese before translating to English.
	Jotting Down Notes	Taking brief notes to organize ideas.	Lily jotted bullet points about pollution causes before writing.
	Outlining	Structuring essay components before drafting.	Lily created intro-body-conclusion outlines.
Revising	Content and Idea Revision	Adjusting ideas or structure after review.	Lily rewrote a paragraph for logical coherence.
	Editing Their Work	Checking grammar, punctuation, and overall accuracy before submission.	Lily used grammar checkers and read aloud to catch errors.
Editing	Having Positive Attitude or Thinking	Viewing writing as a growth opportunity.	Lily embraced learning from mistakes in grammar.
Psychological Strategies	Realizing Fluency > Accuracy	Prioritizing communication over perfection.	Lily focused on expressing ideas even if grammar was imperfect.
	Relaxation	Using calming techniques to reduce stress.	Lily practiced deep breathing and split tasks into parts.
	Resignation	Accepting certain limitations during the writing process.	Pearl avoided complex structures to avoid errors.
	Getting Self-confidence	Gaining belief in writing ability through successful practice.	Lily tried passive voice despite earlier struggles to build confidence.

4. Findings

The challenges encountered by both Pearl and Lily during their expository essay writing processes were varied, with both students facing common difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, planning, and overall writing mechanics. However, each participant exhibited distinct patterns in their struggles, shaped by their individual writing strategies and cognitive processes.

Writing Challenges of the Participants

Both Pearl and Lily struggled with word choice and vocabulary precision. Pearl often chose vague or incorrect words, such as “trouble” instead of “problem,” reflecting hesitation to use more precise terms. She also relied heavily on direct translation from Chinese, leading to unnatural phrases like “healthy problem” for “health problem.” In contrast, Lily used overly complex words to sound academic, resulting in awkward phrasing, such as “facilitate productivity” instead of “help people work better.” While Lily also translated from Chinese, she did so less frequently and made efforts to verify accuracy, though errors remained, like “protect environment more” instead of “protect the environment better.” The key difference was Pearl’s frequent, direct translation and simpler errors, whereas Lily aimed for complexity but needed better control over word choice and phrasing.

Table 5: Comparison of Participants’ Vocabulary Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Word Choice & Precision	Struggles with selecting precise words, leading to imprecise writing.	Tends to use overly complex words to sound academic, sometimes leading to awkward phrasing.	Similarity: Both struggle with word choice.
	Example: Used “trouble” instead of “problem”.	Example: Used “facilitate productivity” instead of “help people work better”.	Difference: Pearl lacks precision; Lily overcomplicates.
Translation Issues	Heavy reliance on Chinese-to-English translation, leading to unnatural expressions.	Occasionally translates phrases directly but less frequently than Pearl.	Similarity: Both struggle with translation.
	Example: Translated “健康问题” as “healthy problem” instead of “health problem”.	Example: Translated “保护环境” as “protect environment more” instead of “protect the environment better”.	Difference: Pearl relies on it more heavily.

Grammar issues were a major challenge for both participants, especially in tense consistency and subject-verb agreement. Pearl often made errors like “Senior citizens has become” instead of “have become” and avoided complex structures, using simpler forms such as “She likes play basketball.” Lily, in contrast, aimed for more complex sentences but introduced errors like “She have many experience” instead of “has much experience,” and awkward phrasing such as “The policy is the best solution what people prefer.” This contrast highlights Pearl’s preference for simpler grammar to minimize errors, while Lily’s attempts at sophistication often led to inaccuracies and less natural constructions.

Table 6: Comparison of Participants’ Grammar Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Tense & Agreement	Struggles with verb tense consistency and subject-verb agreement.	Generally stronger with tenses but occasionally makes agreement errors.	Similarity: Both make subject-verb agreement mistakes, though Pearl’s errors are more frequent.
	Example: “Senior citizens has become” instead of “Senior citizens have become.”	Example: “She have many experience” instead of “She has much experience.”	
Sentence Structure	Prefers simpler sentences; avoids complex grammatical structures.	Attempts complex sentences but often results in awkward phrasing.	Difference: Pearl avoids complexity, while Lily

	Example: “She likes play basketball” instead of “She likes playing basketball.”	Example: “The policy is the best solution what people prefer.”	attempts it but struggles with accuracy.
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In planning, both students faced challenges with topic knowledge and idea development. Pearl struggled to generate ideas, weakening her arguments; for example, she suggested “basketball games” for elderly care, lacking relevance and depth. Lily had a better grasp of common topics but struggled to organize ideas logically. She could generate ideas but often failed to structure them coherently, especially on specialized subjects like environmental issues, where her vocabulary was limited. These differences suggest that while both had knowledge gaps, Pearl’s main difficulty was idea generation, whereas Lily’s challenge lay in organizing her ideas logically.

Table 7: Comparison of Participants’ Planning Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Topic Knowledge	Limited background knowledge on some topics affects argument development.	Generally more informed on common topics but struggles with niche subjects.	Similarity: Both struggle with knowledge gaps in certain topics.
	Example: Using “basketball games” as an activity for seniors.	Example: Lacks vocabulary for environmental issues.	
Idea Development	Hesitates and switches between Chinese and English when brainstorming.	Can generate ideas but struggles to organize them logically.	Difference: Pearl’s challenge is generating ideas, while Lily’s is structuring them.

Starting the essay was difficult for both students. Pearl often wrote generic introductions like “Nowadays, there are many problems in the world.” Lily also began with broad statements but refined her introductions over time, with slightly more specific openings such as “In today’s society, people face many issues, especially in technology.” Both struggled with thesis development and argumentation. Pearl’s thesis was often unclear, with shallow arguments like “Environmental protection is important because it helps the earth.” Lily’s thesis was clearer but repetitive, saying “Technology helps people” multiple times without added depth. Coherence and organization were also issues. Pearl struggled with transitions, abruptly shifting topics without linkage. Lily’s writing was more structured but overused linking words like “therefore” and “furthermore,” making it sound unnatural. These differences show Pearl’s struggle with transitions and Lily’s overuse of transitional phrases.

Table 8: Comparison of Participants’ Writing Process Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Starting the Essay	Finds it hard to begin, leading to generic introductions.	Starts with overgeneralized introductions but improves as the essay progresses.	Similarity: Both start essays with broad statements.
	Example: “Nowadays, there are many problems in the world.”	Example: “In today’s society, people face many issues, especially in technology.”	Difference: Lily refines her introduction more effectively.
Thesis & Argumentation	Thesis is often unclear and arguments lack depth.	Thesis is clearer but arguments can be repetitive.	Similarity: Both struggle with argument development.
	Example: “Environmental protection is important because it helps the earth.”	Example: Repeated “technology helps people” multiple times without adding depth.	Difference: Pearl’s thesis is weaker; Lily repeats points.

Coherence & Organization	Lacks logical flow due to abrupt transitions.	Logical but overuses linking words.	Similarity: Both face coherence issues.
	Example: Jumped from environmental issues to education policies without transition.	Example: Overused “therefore” and “furthermore”, making writing unnatural.	Difference: Pearl lacks transitions, while Lily overuses them.

Both Pearl and Lily experienced challenges with spelling and punctuation. Pearl frequently made spelling errors, such as writing “significent” instead of “significant.” She also struggled with comma placement and capitalization, as seen in her sentence, “environment is important, We must protect it.” Lily, although she occasionally misspelled complex words, was more aware of punctuation and attempted to fix errors such as comma splices, as in the sentence, “She studied hard, she passed the test.” These challenges in mechanics were present for both students, but Lily showed a more conscious effort to review punctuation, while Pearl made more frequent spelling errors.

Table 9: Comparison of Participants’ Mechanics Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Spelling Errors	Frequent spelling mistakes.	Occasionally misspells complex words.	Similarity: Both make spelling errors.
	Example: “significent” instead of “significant”.	Example: Mixed British and American spellings (e.g., “analyse” vs. “analyze”).	Difference: Pearl’s errors are more frequent.
Punctuation & Capitalization	Struggles with comma placement and capitalization.	Overuses commas, leading to comma splices.	Similarity: Both struggle with punctuation.
	Example: “environment is important, We must protect it.”	Example: “She studied hard, she passed the test.”	Difference: Pearl underuses commas; Lily overuses them.

Both participants faced difficulties related to translation during the transcribing stage. Pearl’s strong reliance on direct translation led to awkward phrasing, such as “Technology is the primary productive force” when attempting to translate Chinese expressions into English. Lily also faced similar issues, though her translations were slightly less frequent, as she made an effort to cross-check translations for accuracy, such as when she translated “We should more protect the environment” as “We should protect the environment more.”

Table 10: Comparison of Participants’ Transcribing Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Translation from L1 (Chinese)	Strong reliance on direct translation, causing unnatural phrasing.	Occasionally translates Chinese phrases directly but less frequently.	Similarity: Both struggle with translation.
	Example: “Technology is the primary productive force.”	Example: “We should more protect the environment.”	Difference: Pearl relies on it more than Lily.

Psychological challenges, particularly writing anxiety, were common to both participants, but they experienced these challenges differently. Pearl became easily frustrated when she struggled with vocabulary, often sighing or muttering when unable to find the right words. She also lost motivation quickly, especially when faced with difficulties in language use. For example, she used the phrase “who are in need” instead of a more precise expression due to lack of confidence. Lily, in contrast, was more concerned about grammar and clarity. She would often rewrite sentences multiple times, fearing mistakes and striving for perfection. Despite her motivation to improve, she sometimes became discouraged by her struggles with complex structures. These differences highlight how Pearl’s frustration with vocabulary led to

a loss of motivation, while Lily maintained motivation but faced psychological challenges due to her focus on grammatical accuracy.

Table 11: Comparison of Participants' Psychological Challenges

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Anxiety & Frustration	Easily frustrated when struggling with vocabulary.	Worries more about grammar and clarity.	Similarity: Both experience writing anxiety.
	Example: Sighing or muttering when unable to find the right words.	Example: Rewrites sentences multiple times, fearing mistakes.	Difference: Pearl is frustrated by vocabulary; Lily by grammar.
Motivation & Effort	Occasionally rushes through essays due to lack of interest.	More motivated but discouraged by grammar difficulties.	Difference: Pearl loses motivation faster; Lily stays motivated but gets discouraged.
	Example: Used "who are in need" instead of a more precise phrase.	Example: Gave up on a sentence due to struggling with complex structure.	

Coping Strategies of the Participants

Both Pearl and Lily employed various coping strategies to address the challenges they encountered during their expository essay writing processes. These strategies encompassed vocabulary, grammar, planning, writing process, mechanics, and psychological challenges. The following paragraphs detail the coping strategies used by both participants, highlighting the similarities and differences in their approaches. When facing vocabulary challenges, both Pearl and Lily used synonym substitution as a coping strategy. Pearl chose simpler words, such as using "happiness" instead of "welfare," resulting in less precise expressions. Lily also used substitutions but often picked overly academic words, like replacing "help" with "facilitate," leading to awkward phrasing. While both managed gaps this way, Pearl favored simplicity, whereas Lily's choices sometimes sounded unnatural. Both students used translation as a coping strategy when stuck. Pearl often translated directly from Chinese to English without checking for natural phrasing, as in "Technology is the primary productive force" for "科技是第一生产力." Lily, in contrast, used bilingual dictionaries and translation tools but cross-checked for accuracy, such as verifying "economic sustainability" for "经济可持续性." While both relied on translation, Pearl did so more heavily and without verification, whereas Lily ensured greater accuracy.

Table 12: Comparison of Participants' Vocabulary Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Synonym Substitution	Uses simpler words when she cannot recall precise vocabulary.	Uses a dictionary to find synonyms but sometimes picks unnatural words.	Similarity: Both use synonym substitution.
	Example: Used "happiness" instead of "welfare".	Example: Replaced "help" with "facilitate", making the sentence sound unnatural.	Difference: Pearl picks simple words; Lily overcomplicates.
Translation Reliance	Translates from Chinese to English when stuck, even if the translation is awkward.	Uses bilingual dictionaries and translation tools but cross-checks them for accuracy.	Similarity: Both use translation.
	Example: Translated "科技是第一生产力" as "Technology is the primary productive force."	Example: Verified "economic sustainability" after translating "经济可持续性".	Difference: Lily double-checks; Pearl translates directly.

Both Pearl and Lily adjusted their sentence structures to manage grammar challenges. Pearl simplified her writing with short, clear sentences like “We should protect the environment,” avoiding errors but limiting complexity. Lily attempted longer, more complex sentences, revising them multiple times for accuracy, such as “The environment, which people depend on, should be preserved...” While both adapted their strategies, Pearl favored simplification, whereas Lily aimed for complexity despite struggles with accuracy.

In terms of grammar checking, Pearl skimmed her work for obvious errors but often missed some mistakes, such as “She go to school every day,” which she did not notice. Lily, in contrast, used grammar-checking tools like Grammarly and reread her sentences aloud to ensure clarity and correctness. She corrected errors like “She go” to “She goes” after checking, which allowed her to refine her grammar more thoroughly than Pearl.

Table 13: Comparison of Participants’ Grammar Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Sentence Simplification	Writes in short, simple sentences to avoid grammatical errors.	Tries long, complex sentences but revises them multiple times.	Similarity: Both adjust sentence structures.
	Example: “We should protect the environment. It is important.”	Example: “The environment, which people depend on, should be preserved through...” (edited several times).	Difference: Pearl simplifies; Lily attempts complexity and revises.
Grammar Checking	Skims for obvious errors but often misses mistakes.	Uses grammar tools like Grammarly and rereads sentences aloud to check flow.	Similarity: Both attempt error correction.
	Example: Did not notice “She go to school every day.”	Example: Corrected “She go” to “She goes” after checking.	Difference: Lily uses tools; Pearl relies on skimming.

Both participants planned before writing but used different approaches. Pearl wrote Chinese notes like “如何减少污染” (How to reduce pollution) and then translated them into English, helping organize her thoughts but adding complexity due to translation. In contrast, Lily used mind maps and outlines, creating diagrams linking ideas such as “pollution → government policy → individual responsibility,” giving her essays clear structure. While both planned in advance, Pearl relied more on translation, whereas Lily used visual tools to organize her ideas effectively.

Regarding essay structure, Pearl began writing immediately and revised afterward, rearranging paragraphs in her second draft for better flow. In contrast, Lily created an outline with bullet points for the introduction, body, and conclusion before drafting, ensuring clear organization from the start. While both revised for structure, Pearl did so after writing, whereas Lily planned thoroughly beforehand.

Table 14: Comparison of Participants’ Planning Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Idea Brainstorming	Uses Chinese notes first, then translates ideas into English.	Uses mind maps and outlines to organize ideas before writing.	Similarity: Both plan before writing.
	Example: Wrote “如何减少污染” before attempting “How to reduce pollution.”	Example: Created a diagram linking “pollution →	Difference: Pearl translates ideas; Lily organizes visually.

		government policy → individual responsibility.”	
Structuring the Essay	Starts writing immediately and restructures after finishing.	Creates an outline before writing to guide organization.	Similarity: Both revise for structure.
	Example: Rearranged paragraphs in her second draft.	Example: Wrote bullet points for intro, body, conclusion before drafting.	Difference: Pearl restructures later; Lily plans before writing.

Both students struggled to start their essays. Pearl often hesitated, producing generic introductions like “Nowadays, there are many problems in the world.” In contrast, Lily used a template, starting with phrases like “In recent years, the issue of X has gained attention,” which helped her begin more confidently. While both faced challenges in starting, Pearl hesitated, whereas Lily’s structured approach helped her overcome this difficulty.

In rewriting and revising, Pearl preferred working on one draft with minimal edits, making only minor grammatical corrections without changing her arguments. For example, she fixed small errors but avoided substantial revisions. In contrast, Lily rewrote multiple drafts to enhance clarity and coherence, even revising entire paragraphs for better logical flow. While both revised their work, Pearl’s approach was limited and less thorough, whereas Lily’s revisions were more comprehensive and detailed.

Table 15: Comparison of Participants’ Writing Process Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Starting the Essay	Hesitates before starting, leading to generic introductions.	Uses a template for introductions to avoid hesitation.	Similarity: Both struggle to start writing.
	Example: “Nowadays, there are many problems in the world.”	Example: Prefers starting with “In recent years, the issue of X has gained attention.”	Difference: Pearl hesitates; Lily uses a template.
Rewriting & Revising	Prefers one draft with minor edits.	Rewrites multiple drafts for clarity and coherence.	Similarity: Both revise.
	Example: Fixes a few grammar errors but does not rewrite whole sections.	Example: Revised an entire paragraph to improve logical flow.	Difference: Pearl does minimal revisions; Lily rewrites significantly.

Both Pearl and Lily used spellcheck to address spelling challenges, though their approaches varied. Pearl relied on spellcheck but did not manually check her work for errors. For example, she missed the spelling mistake “significant” in her essay. Lily also used spellcheck but actively practiced difficult words like “significant,” writing them down multiple times after noticing an error. She paid more attention to spelling accuracy than Pearl, who did not engage in active practice. Both students had punctuation challenges, but they approached this differently. Pearl underused commas, as seen in her sentence, “environment is important, We must protect it.” In contrast, Lily reviewed her punctuation carefully to avoid errors. For example, she fixed a misplaced comma splice in her final draft, demonstrating a more proactive approach to punctuation than Pearl.

Table 16: Comparison of Participants’ Mechanics Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Spelling Corrections	Relies on spellcheck but does not manually check words.	Uses spellcheck but also writes down difficult words for practice.	Similarity: Both use spellcheck.
	Example: Missed “significant” in an essay.	Example: Practiced spelling “significant” multiple times after noticing an error.	Difference: Lily actively practices spelling.
Punctuation Checking	Does not focus much on punctuation.	Reviews punctuation carefully to avoid errors.	Similarity: Both have punctuation errors.
	Example: “She studies, and she, works hard.”	Example: Fixed a misplaced comma splice in her final draft.	Difference: Lily consciously checks punctuation.

Both students used psychological coping strategies to manage writing anxiety. Pearl became frustrated and took breaks when overwhelmed by vocabulary issues, often stopping mid-essay and sighing when stuck. In contrast, Lily used deep breathing and broke tasks into smaller steps, writing one paragraph at a time to stay focused. While both took breaks to manage stress, Pearl’s approach was driven by frustration, whereas Lily relied on more structured relaxation techniques to maintain control. In terms of building confidence, Pearl avoided complex structures to prevent mistakes. For example, she wrote “It is good” instead of attempting more complex phrasing. Lily, however, pushed herself to try more challenging structures, even though she struggled with them. She attempted passive voice constructions, accepting mistakes as part of her learning process. This contrast highlights Pearl’s tendency to avoid difficult tasks and Lily’s willingness to take risks despite her struggles.

Table 17: Comparison of Participants’ Psychological Coping Strategies

Aspect	Pearl	Lily	Similarity/Difference
Managing Writing Anxiety	Gets frustrated and takes breaks when overwhelmed.	Uses deep breathing techniques and breaks tasks into smaller steps.	Similarity: Both take breaks when stressed.
	Example: Stopped writing mid-essay after struggling with vocabulary.	Example: Writes one paragraph at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed.	Difference: Lily uses structured relaxation techniques.
Building Confidence	Avoids difficult structures to prevent mistakes.	Pushes herself to try complex structures and accepts mistakes as part of learning.	Difference: Pearl avoids challenges; Lily embraces them.
	Example: Writes “It is good” instead of attempting complex phrasing.	Example: Attempted passive voice even though she struggled.	

5. Discussion

This study explored the expository essay writing processes and coping strategies of two Chinese EFL non-English major students. The findings revealed that while both participants faced a broad range of challenges—including lexical, grammatical, planning, mechanical, translational, and psychological difficulties—their coping strategies reflected distinct patterns shaped by individual differences in cognitive style, confidence, and writing experience.

The challenges identified in this study are consistent with those reported in prior research. Both participants struggled with vocabulary precision and lexical choice, aligning with the lexical difficulties highlighted by Kao and Reynolds (2017), Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), and Alfaki (2015). Similar to Fareed et al. (2016), the students also experienced grammar challenges, including tense consistency and sentence structure, reflecting the struggles with syntax and grammatical control that are commonly reported among EFL learners. Translation issues were pervasive for both participants, echoing the findings of Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022), Nurjanah (2018), and Elfa (2020), who observed that over-reliance on L1 can result in awkward and inaccurate phrasing. Pearl's heavy dependence on direct translation, compared to Lily's more controlled and strategic use of translation tools, mirrors Guo and Huang's (2020) discussion on the importance of metacognitive awareness when transferring L1 strategies to L2 writing. The participants' difficulties with planning and idea development corroborate earlier findings (Alfaki, 2015; Fareed et al., 2016), underscoring that insufficient topic knowledge and weak idea organization remain key barriers to effective expository writing. Pearl's reliance on post-hoc structural adjustments contrasts with Lily's proactive use of mind maps and outlines, supporting the argument by Wenden (1991) and Xiao (2007) that metacognitive strategies such as prewriting planning enhance coherence and reduce cognitive load during writing. Psychological barriers, particularly writing anxiety and low confidence, were prominent for both participants, aligning with the affective challenges reported by Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004), Fareed et al. (2016), and Hu (2022). Pearl's avoidance of complex structures and frustration in response to lexical blocks illustrates a more risk-averse and reactive coping style, whereas Lily's use of relaxation techniques and incremental drafting aligns with Qashoa's (2014) and Wang and Han's (2017) advocacy for fostering resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms in EFL writing.

Regarding coping strategies, both participants employed a mix of behavioral, cognitive, and affective tactics, consistent with the multi-dimensional models proposed by Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Zhang and Hasim (2023), and Asnas and Hidayanti (2024). Lily's active engagement with grammar tools, revision practices, and structured relaxation suggests a more metacognitively informed approach, consistent with research emphasizing the benefits of metacognitive control (Wang & Han, 2017; Zhao, 2012). Pearl's more surface-level strategies, such as simplification and dependence on templates, reflect a limited application of metacognitive skills, underscoring the variability in strategy sophistication among non-English majors (Chen, 2011; Chien, 2012). Finally, the divergence in participants' approaches to revision reinforces the importance of viewing writing as an iterative, recursive process (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hayes, 1996). Lily's willingness to engage in multiple rounds of revision aligns with the process-oriented models of writing development (Xu & Xia, 2021; Li, 2016), whereas Pearl's one-draft approach suggests a more product-focused mindset that may limit writing improvement.

In sum, this study confirms the multi-layered nature of EFL writing challenges and highlights how coping strategies vary significantly between learners. It also underscores the critical role of metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation in shaping effective writing practices, echoing the findings of earlier researchers such as Victori (1995), Oxford (1990), and Yasuda (2015).

6. Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical and practical implications for enhancing writing instruction among Chinese EFL non-English majors.

One key implication is the importance of promoting metacognitive strategy instruction. Lily's more effective coping mechanisms underscore the value of training students in strategies such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation (Wenden, 1991; Wang & Han, 2017). Writing curricula should incorporate these strategies explicitly, with teachers modeling the use of tools like outlines, mind maps, and revision techniques. This approach encourages students to perceive writing as a recursive process, fostering greater autonomy and reflective practice. Another important consideration is enhancing students' psychological readiness. The significant writing anxiety experienced by both participants suggests the need to integrate affective strategies into instruction. Techniques such as relaxation exercises, positive self-talk, and incremental goal setting (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Qashoa, 2014) can help students manage emotional stress and build confidence. Additionally, creating a classroom environment that values progress over perfection and encourages risk-taking can empower learners to approach complex writing tasks more openly. Revision awareness is another area requiring attention. The contrast between Lily's iterative revisions and Pearl's minimal editing reveals that many students may not fully understand the value of deep revision. Instruction should demystify the revision process through scaffolded drafting, peer feedback, and teacher conferencing (Xu, 2018; Flower & Hayes, 1981), encouraging students to engage critically with their own texts. Finally, supporting the transfer of L1 strategies is crucial. While L1-based planning can help with idea generation (Guo & Huang, 2020), students need explicit instruction to adapt those ideas to fit English rhetorical norms. Teachers should provide contrastive rhetoric instruction and guided practice in bridging L1 and L2 structures, enabling students to produce more coherent and culturally appropriate texts.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of understanding individual variation in the writing processes and coping strategies of Chinese EFL non-English majors. Both participants faced overlapping challenges—lexical imprecision, grammatical errors, planning difficulties, and writing anxiety—but differed markedly in how they coped with these obstacles. The findings highlight the critical role of metacognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and revision practices in fostering effective expository writing.

Pedagogically, this study suggests that writing instruction for non-English majors must go beyond grammar and vocabulary to address the broader cognitive, affective, and metacognitive dimensions of writing. Practical interventions such as metacognitive training, affective strategy instruction, and structured revision can equip students with the tools needed to become more confident and effective writers.

Future research should expand the sample size to explore whether the patterns observed here generalize to a broader population of Chinese EFL learners. Longitudinal studies could also examine how sustained instruction in metacognitive and affective strategies influences writing development over time. Ultimately, fostering self-aware, resilient writers is key to improving expository writing competence among EFL learners in China and beyond.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

This study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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