

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

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the expository essay writing processes and strategies of two Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) non-English major students at an applied university in China. The study emerged from the limited understanding of how non-English major students approach and navigate L2 writing tasks, alongside the lack of pedagogical support that addresses both their cognitive and emotional needs. Using a combination of think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews, retrospective reflections, and writing sample analyses, this research closely examines how learners engage in the recursive stages of writing, including planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring their progress. The analysis reveals that, while both participants utilized similar strategies, such as bilingual thinking, self-monitoring, and verbal rehearsing, they exhibited significant differences in other key areas. Student A demonstrated a dynamic, reflective approach to writing, but struggled with emotional burdens that affected her overall process, while Student B exhibited a more structured approach with consistent execution and greater emotional resilience. The findings underscore the crucial role of metacognitive strategies, emotional regulation, and task-specific planning in shaping students' writing outcomes. By emphasizing the importance of addressing cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors, this study contributes to learner-centered writing instruction by advocating for individualized approaches that integrate cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of L2 writing.

Keywords: *China, EFL non-English majors, expository essay writing, writing process, writing strategies*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Writing is a complex, cognitively demanding process that requires the integration of multiple skills, including idea generation, organization, linguistic accuracy, and revision. For Chinese EFL non-English majors, mastering expository writing is particularly challenging due to limited exposure to English, insufficient instruction in writing strategies, and a general lack of awareness regarding effective writing processes (Xiao, 2007; Zhao, 2012). The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is a nationwide English proficiency exam in China designed for non-English majors. It assesses students' ability to use English in both academic and real-life contexts. The writing section, which is the first part of the test, requires students to compose a 120–150-word expository essay within 30 minutes. Prompts are typically based on a topic, outline, or visual stimulus, and the essay is evaluated based on idea development, organization, linguistic

accuracy, and task appropriateness. Students must articulate their views clearly, provide logical reasoning, and support their ideas effectively. However, despite the significance of this section, many test-takers consistently score poorly, revealing their struggles with both the writing process and the strategic skills required for effective writing (Meng, 2011). Although effective writing generally follows a recursive process involving planning, drafting, revising, and editing, research shows that many Chinese EFL learners adopt a linear or translation-based approach that bypasses key stages of development (Len & Yang, 2015). Additionally, metacognitive and self-regulation strategies—such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflection—are often underutilized, further impeding writing proficiency and overall performance (Yasuda, 2015).

Research Problem and Rationale

Research on L2 writing has evolved significantly, yet expository essay writing remains underexplored, particularly in China. Existing studies primarily focus on argumentative and narrative writing, often neglecting critical processes like prewriting, transcribing, and revising in expository writing. Similarly, research on writing strategies has emphasized proficiency-based differences but lacks insight into strategy use for expository essays among non-English major students.

Since the 1970s, research on cognitive processes in writing has been a key focus in language education. However, in L2 writing, Chinese studies have lagged behind international research, primarily emphasizing textual outcomes over writing processes. Recent studies have begun exploring L2 writing processes, investigating aspects such as proficiency-based differences (Chang, 2020), read-to-write composing (Li, 2016), and online writing behaviors (Xu & Xia, 2021). Other research has examined pausing patterns and revision strategies (Xu, 2018; Shen & Chen, 2021). Despite these efforts, most studies focus on argumentative and narrative writing, leaving expository essay composition underexplored. There is a need to examine key processes such as prewriting, transcribing, and revising. Specifically, research should assess the effectiveness of prewriting techniques such as brainstorming, outlining, and concept mapping in enhancing idea generation and organization. Additionally, studies should explore how EFL learners transcribe ideas into coherent texts and revise for clarity, coherence, and complexity. Understanding these aspects will inform instructional strategies and improve students' analytical and communicative skills. Addressing these gaps will contribute to L2 writing models and provide insights into Chinese non-English major students' experiences with expository essay composition.

Research on writing strategies among college students has explored their correlation with writing achievement and effectiveness across linguistic contexts. For instance, Chen (2011) and Chien (2012) examined the predictive role of writing strategies in English writing performance, while Guo and Huang (2020) analyzed strategy use among Chinese international postgraduate students in both L1 and L2 writing.

Xu's studies on revision strategies (Xu & Qi, 2017; Xu, 2018; Xu & Xia, 2021) highlight how strategic writing aids in managing cognitive load. Despite these advancements, further research is needed to validate process-oriented approaches in college English instruction. Current studies often focus on specific groups, such as proficient English majors (Wang & Han, 2017; Hu, 2022), which limits generalizability. Additionally, Kao and Reynolds (2017) reclassified Oxford's (1990) strategy taxonomy, emphasizing the need for task-specific strategy research. A significant gap remains in understanding expository essay writing strategies, particularly among non-English major Chinese university students. Future research should examine strategy use across different writing stages and proficiency levels to identify common challenges and inform targeted instructional interventions, ultimately improving students' writing competence.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate the expository essay writing processes and strategies employed by two non-English major students at an applied university in China within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This study aims to explore how these students navigate the various stages of the writing process, including prewriting, drafting, and revising, while examining the specific strategies they use to generate ideas, organize their arguments, and improve the coherence and clarity of their essays. By focusing on two individual cases, this research seeks to analyze the similarities and differences in their writing processes and strategy use, and offer recommendations for improving their overall writing effectiveness.

Research Questions

1. How do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students engage in the processes when composing expository essays?
2. How do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students utilize various writing strategies throughout different processes of the expository essay writing?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study examines the writing processes and the strategies involved in expository essay writing. By analyzing prominent models within each domain, the study aims to elucidate the interconnections between various components. Specifically, it investigates the stages of the writing process and the diverse strategies that writers employ to develop their essays effectively.

Models of Writing Process

Writing process models have evolved to better understand text composition, incorporating cognitive, social, and procedural elements. **Flower and Hayes' (1981)** cognitive composing model presents writing as a recursive process involving planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring. Planning generates ideas, organizes content, and sets goals by retrieving and structuring information. Translating converts these plans into written text. Reviewing improves text quality through reading and editing for coherence and correctness. Monitoring regulates these processes, helping writers manage their composition. Though the stages appear linear, they are interconnected and recur throughout writing, highlighting the complex cognitive engagement in producing well-structured texts. **Hayes's (1996)** revised model expands on the 1981 framework, emphasizing the task environment and individual factors like motivation and cognition. The process includes Reflection for reasoning, Text Production to convert thoughts into writing, and Text Interpretation to ensure coherence through rereading. This model highlights writing as an interactive cognitive process influenced by both internal and external factors. **Kellogg's (1996)** model emphasizes the role of working memory in writing through three components: Formulation, Execution, and Monitoring. Formulation includes Planning (goal setting) and Translating (converting ideas into language). Execution involves Programming (preparing motor actions) and Executing (transcribing). Monitoring consists of Reading (verifying coherence) and Editing (aligning intentions with output). This model highlights writing as a cognitive process with ongoing planning, transcription, and revision. **Williams' (2003)** Phase Model of Writing presents eight recursive stages: prewriting, planning, drafting, pausing, reading, revising, editing, and publishing. Prewriting generates ideas through brainstorming and discussion, while planning addresses audience and organization. Drafting develops content over time, with pausing for reflection. Reading compares the draft with initial plans to ensure coherence. Revising involves large-scale changes, often using feedback, while editing refines grammar, punctuation, and style. Publishing presents the final text to its audience. The model highlights writing as a dynamic, non-linear process shaped by ongoing reflection and revision. **Abdel Latif's (2021)** model emphasizes writing as an iterative, reflective process. Monitoring guides task management and self-questioning, while content search retrieves ideas and language options. Ideational planning organizes content across text levels, and linguistic rehearsing refines sentences. Reviewing ensures accuracy through L1 use and rereading. Transcribing converts ideas into written form, and text revising enhances the draft through additions, deletions, substitutions, and reordering at multiple linguistic levels.

Drawing on the key features of the models proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), Hayes (1996), Kellogg (1996), Williams (2003), and Abdel Latif (2021), this study synthesizes a comprehensive framework to analyze the expository essay writing processes of two Chinese non-English major students.

Each model contributes distinct perspectives: cognitive processing (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 1996),

interaction with social and environmental contexts (Hayes, 1996), the incorporation of recursive and reflective phases (Williams, 2003), and self-regulation and monitoring (Abdel Latif, 2021). This synthesized model incorporates planning, writing, reviewing, and monitoring as dynamic and recursive components, while also acknowledging the influence of task environment, working memory, and individual metacognitive engagement. Table 1 presents this integrated writing process model, which serves as the analytical framework for examining how the participants develop their expository essays.

Table 1: Writing Process Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Planning	Goal Setting	Writers establish goals, stance, organization, and key points.
	Idea Generating	Writers develop ideas using discussions, outlining, and prewriting techniques.
Writing	Drafting	Writers create an initial draft using various strategies like free writing and talk-writing.
	Rehearsing	Writers refine sentence structures, arguments, and organization before inclusion.
	Transcribing	Writers convert ideas into written form based on a structured plan.
Reviewing	Evaluating	Writers analyze and refine text for coherence, meaning, and language accuracy.
	Revising	Writers correct errors and improve sentence structure, style, and alignment with goals.
Monitoring	Monitoring	Writers regulate the writing process, assess progress, and ensure coherence.

Models of Writing Strategies

Writing strategies are essential techniques used throughout the writing process, helping writers effectively plan, compose, and revise their texts. Several key models have emerged to explain the strategies employed during writing, with a focus on cognitive, metacognitive, and social approaches. **Arndt's (1987)** study identified eight key ESL writing strategies based on the composing behaviors of six Chinese postgraduate EFL students. These include planning and global planning to organize content, rehearsing to test ideas, and repeating words to maintain flow. Rereading supports coherence, while questioning aids in clarifying ideas. Revising refines meaning, and editing corrects language errors. Arndt also highlighted protocol analysis as a valuable tool for diagnosing weaknesses and fostering self-evaluation, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the writing process. **Wenden's (1991)** study focused on the metacognitive strategies ESL students use to regulate writing. Key strategies include planning to generate and organize content, and evaluation through questioning, revising, and editing for clarity. Monitoring allows writers to track progress and adjust as needed, while resourcing involves repeating language chunks and using reduction strategies. The use of L1 also aids in idea generation and transcription. Together, these strategies promote coherence, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2026

organization, and effective problem-solving in the writing process. **Victori (1995)** identified key ESL writing strategies through interviews and think-aloud protocols. These include planning to structure content, monitoring to track progress, and evaluating to reassess goals. Resourcing involves using external references for language support, while repeating aids fluency through the reuse of language chunks. Reduction strategies help manage difficulties by simplifying or rewording text. The use of L1 supports idea generation and accurate transcription. Together, these strategies enhance organization, coherence, and problem-solving throughout the writing process. **Abdel Latif's (2021)** writing strategy model outlines the cognitive and linguistic processes of writing as dynamic and recursive. Writers begin with monitoring, setting goals, and regulating motivation. They use memory retrieval strategies like self-questioning and verbal repetition, followed by ideational planning at various text levels. Linguistic rehearsing enhances clarity through sentence and word practice. Reviewing involves summarizing, rereading, and using L1 for coherence. Transcribing converts ideas into written form, while revising refines the text through addition, deletion, or reordering. The model emphasizes the continuous interplay of planning, reviewing, and revising throughout the writing process.

Drawing on the key writing strategy models outlined above, a comprehensive framework emerges that highlights the cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic dimensions of the writing process. Across Arndt (1987), Wenden (1991), Victori (1995), and Abdel Latif (2021), common strategies such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, revising, and editing are consistently emphasized. These models also underscore the dynamic, recursive nature of writing, where strategies such as rehearsing, repeating, and the use of the first language (L1) play a supportive role in idea generation, language use, and problem-solving. Together, these models provide an integrated lens through which to analyze the expository essay writing strategies employed by two Chinese non-English major students, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Writing Strategies Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Assigning Goals	Goal-setting	Writers establish objectives, clarifying purpose, scope, and direction.
Idea Planning	Planning	Writers generate and organize ideas at different levels.
Generating Ideas	Guidelines	Writers use structured methods to generate ideas.
	Filled Pausing	Writers use “um” or “er” to maintain writing flow.
	Verbalizing	Writers verbalize thoughts for better recall.
Drafting	Outlining	Writers create flexible outlines for structure.
	Note-taking	Writers capture ideas and research for reference.
	Organizing	Writers arrange content logically.
Retrieving	Plan & Info Retrieval	Writers recall plans and relevant details from memory.
Rehearsing	Sentence, Phrase, Word Rehearsing	Writers refine expression, clarity, and accuracy.

Problem-Solving	Reduction	Writers adjust by removing or paraphrasing content.
	Looking for Models	Writers draw inspiration from external sources.
Transcribing	Translating & Writing	Writers convert ideas into written form.
Reviewing	Questioning, Rereading,	Writers check organization, coherence, and accuracy.
	Evaluating	
Revising	Plan & Text Changes	Writers adjust content for clarity and effectiveness.
Monitoring	Task & Self-Monitoring	Writers track progress, manage cognitive load, and regulate motivation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the expository essay writing experiences of two Chinese non-English major students in tertiary education. The research aims to understand the writing processes and strategies that these students use during essay composition. A case study design was chosen for its strength in examining real-life contexts, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences.

Participants

Two second-year non-English major students (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, which helped them develop essential writing skills. Their preparation for the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), which includes a writing component, motivated them to practice writing and familiarize themselves with CET-4 composition types. This experience made them ideal for the think-aloud technique, as their familiarity with CET-4 tasks enabled them to effectively articulate their cognitive processes during writing.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a multi-method approach to data collection, including Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), semi-structured interviews, retrospective interviews, and writing sample analysis. The think-aloud protocol (TAP) was used in this study to capture participants' cognitive processes during L2 expository essay writing. This introspective method, widely used in writing research (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Qi & Lapkin, 2001), involved participants verbalizing their thoughts while composing. TAPs provided detailed insights into writing strategies, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Audio and video recordings of the process allowed researchers to analyze participants' mental activity (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Chosen for its ability to reveal cognitive processes, TAP had been foundational in writing research and contributed to understanding L2 writing processes and developing comprehensive writing models. Each participant underwent a semi-structured interview before the think-aloud session, which focused on their perceptions of English

writing, past writing experiences, and educational backgrounds, using open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. Retrospective interviews involved participants reviewing their think-aloud video recordings of writing tasks, reflecting on specific moments like pauses. They were asked to explain their thoughts, challenges, and strategies during writing. Probing questions uncovered decision-making, cognitive processes, and writing techniques. These interviews aimed to gain insights into EFL writing practices, strategies, and challenges, enhancing understanding of cognitive mechanisms and effective writing strategies through analysis of samples and draft notes. The writing sample analysis evaluated grammatical errors, coherence, organization, and linguistic accuracy in three expository essays from each participant based on CET-4 writing standards. Each student wrote three essays on the following topics: “The Importance of Environmental Protection”, “How to Treat Senior Citizens in Modern Society”, and “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Society”. For each task, they were required to write a composition of 120 to 180 words.

Data Analysis

This study employed a systematic and theory-driven thematic analysis to explore the L2 expository essay writing processes and strategies of non-English major students. Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), retrospective interviews, and pre-task semi-structured interviews were transcribed and verified by participants. Detailed behavioral descriptions were created based on these sources and writing samples. Guided by established models (e.g., Creswell & Poth’s (2018); Braun & Clarke, 2006), the author conducted a theoretical thematic analysis (i.e., coding, categorizing, and developing themes), focusing on writing processes and strategies. Coding targeted key areas and emphasized individual variation through participant-specific theme generation. A comparative analysis was then conducted to identify shared and unique themes, offering both general insights and nuanced differences in cognitive and strategic writing behaviors. Table 3 presents the coding system, including the main themes, categories, and illustrative data excerpts.

Table 3: Coding System of Qualitative Data

Theme	Code (Subcategory)	Description	Data Example (Excerpt from Text)
Pre-Writing Cognitive Strategies	Topic Translation	Translating topic into L1 to aid understanding	"Pearl read the essay topic... and translated it into Chinese..."
	Idea Generation in L1	Using Chinese to brainstorm ideas	"She came up with an idea in Chinese... ‘环境保护已经成为了一件相当严峻的事情’"

	Outline Planning	Organizing structure in L1 with numbered points	"Then she wrote down the number 1... and drew a long line..."
Language Problem-Solving	Vocabulary Substitution	Using synonyms when stuck on a word	"She thought of another word 'significant' that is similar to 'crucial'"
	Translation Adjustments	Revising translations when initial English attempts were unsatisfactory	"She said 'it is...', but didn't seem to think of how to express it"
	Use of Draft Symbols	Drawing lines and circles as memory cues or placeholders	"She drew a horizontal line below... to remind herself to check for the correct expression"
Metacognitive Monitoring	Self-Correction During Planning	Revising outline or concept while planning	"She sighed and said 'oh', then changed her idea to 'as far as I know'"
	Self-Evaluation of Expression	Judging the quality or effectiveness of a sentence during writing	"Why do I feel like this sentence is so empty?"
Writing While Thinking	Simultaneous Writing and Verbalizing	Writing while speaking aloud the thought process	"She wrote while speaking on the essay paper..."
	L1-L2 Code-switching	Alternating between Chinese and English during writing and thinking	"She speaks English directly when she can... relies on Chinese when she cannot"
Affective Strategies	Expressing Emotion (Sighs, Frustration)	Displaying emotions when encountering difficulty	"She sighed twice... said she was a bit distracted and tired"
	Motivational Self-Talk	Using internal dialogue to maintain focus	"She muttered to herself... 'Add a relative clause'"
Revision and Monitoring	Word Count Awareness	Checking and adjusting length to meet task requirements	"She muttered to herself, 'Wow, it's definitely not enough'"
	On-the-spot Lexical Revisions	Replacing vocabulary during the act of writing	"She changed it to 'just like animals, plants and so on'"
Rhetorical Strategy Use	Use of Linking Devices	Employing cohesive devices (e.g., 'initially', 'additionally')	"She wrote 'initially'... then 'additionally'"
	Citing Proverbs	Using culturally familiar sayings to enrich content	"She added: 'Just as an old saying goes...'"
Problem-Avoidance Strategy	Skippping Unknown Words	Avoiding words when unsure of spelling or meaning	"She decided to give up... used 'who are in need' instead"

Findings

This study explored the expository essay writing processes, and strategies of two Chinese EFL non-English major students, Pearl and Lily. Through a detailed analysis of their writing behaviors, it was found that both participants engaged in a four-phase recursive writing process—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—consistent with Flower and Hayes’ (1981) cognitive composing model. However, individual differences in their strategy use revealed varying levels of effectiveness.

Writing Processes of the Participants

The writing processes of Pearl and Lily were analyzed across four primary stages: Planning, Writing, Reviewing, and Monitoring. A detailed thematic analysis revealed both similarities and differences in their approaches, with key insights emerging at each stage.

In the planning stage, both Pearl and Lily used structured approaches to goal setting and idea generation. Pearl translated essay titles into Chinese for comprehension, while Lily underlined key terms to maintain focus. Both brainstormed bilingually, but Pearl relied more on Chinese, which slowed her writing, while Lily used visual tools to stay aligned with the theme. Pearl followed rigid high school templates, limiting creativity, whereas Lily used a “general-specific-general” format, offering a more flexible, systematic structure. For example, Pearl translated the essay title “The Importance of Environmental Protection” into Chinese and reiterated it to reinforce her understanding of the task. In contrast, Lily underlined key terms such as “importance” and “protection” in the title, ensuring that her content remained focused on the core theme. Table 4 outlines the similarities and differences between the two participants’ planning processes, focusing on goal setting, idea generation, and the use of templates.

Table 4: Comparison of Participants’ Planning Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Goal Setting	Structured, translating essay titles into Chinese to ensure understanding.	Structured and purposeful, highlighting key terms to maintain focus on the central theme.	Both use structured approaches with goal setting.	Pearl relies more on translation than Lily.
Idea Generating	Generates ideas by brainstorming in Chinese and translating to English.	Uses bilingual thinking, writes down Chinese phrases and translates them into English.	Both use bilingual thinking for idea generation.	Lily uses more visual tools (underlining, circling).
Use of Templates	Relies on high school templates, limiting creative thinking.	Uses a "general-specific-general" format, adhering to a strict outline.	Both follow structured formats.	Pearl's approach is more rigidly influenced by past education.

During writing, both Pearl and Lily used similar drafting and rehearsing techniques but differed in flexibility. Pearl translated ideas while drafting and practiced “talk-writing” for refinement, showing a more iterative approach. Lily rigidly followed her outline, translating ideas step-by-step for coherence. Both rehearsed aloud, but Pearl focused on vocabulary and sentence refinement, while Lily emphasized alignment with her outline. In transcription, Pearl frequently paused for grammar and word choice corrections, slowing progress, whereas Lily corrected minor errors steadily but overlooked deeper revisions. Pearl’s approach was reflective, while Lily’s was more linear and driven by efficiency. For instance, Pearl practiced spelling words like “measures” and revised phrases such as “a concern thing” to “a concern.” Lily, on the other hand, tested sentences such as “AI can help save time” in both Chinese and English before finalizing her sentence structures. Table 5 outlines the similarities and differences between the two participants’ writing stages, highlighting key themes such as drafting, rehearsing, transcribing, and challenges related to translation.

Table 5: Comparison of Participants’ Writing Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Drafting	Translates Chinese concepts into English, practices “talk-writing” to refine thoughts.	Adheres to her outline strictly, translating ideas step-by-step from Chinese to English.	Both use translation as part of drafting.	Lily follows her outline more strictly than Pearl.
Rehearsing	Repeats phrases aloud, often rehearsing specific words to ensure accuracy.	Tests sentences in both languages, refining translation through verbal testing.	Both rehearse verbally before writing.	Lily focuses on testing sentence structures.
Transcribing	Frequently adjusts grammar and vocabulary, showing self-correction.	Struggles with grammar and spelling due to direct translation, corrects minor mistakes on the go.	Both engage in self-correction while writing.	Pearl sometimes overthinks, leading to slower progress.
Translation Challenges	Balances literal translation with authentic expression, often resulting in fragmented thinking.	Translates ideas directly, sometimes resulting in awkward phrases and grammar errors.	Both struggle with translation challenges.	Pearl’s translation process is more iterative and hesitant.

In the reviewing stage, both Pearl and Lily engaged in evaluation and revision but differed in focus. Pearl enriched her content by refining sentences and exploring alternative expressions, showing a dynamic and adaptive revision style. Lily, by contrast, compared her draft to her outline, translating sentences back into Chinese to ensure consistency, focusing mainly on structural alignment. Pearl made deeper changes to vocabulary, structure, and coherence, while Lily’s revisions were more surface-level, adjusting phrases and adding minor details. This reflects Pearl’s flexibility and content exploration versus Lily’s outline-driven,

constrained revisions. For example, Pearl revised the sentence “the environmental trouble has become more and more worse” to “the environmental problem has become more and more serious,” demonstrating a focus on linguistic refinement. Lily, meanwhile, translated sentences back into Chinese to ensure that they matched her intended meaning, emphasizing structural coherence over linguistic nuance. Table 6 outlines the similarities and differences in the two participants’ reviewing stages, focusing on evaluating, revising, and final review.

Table 6: Comparison of Participants’ Reviewing Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Evaluating	Actively evaluates work, adding details when sentences feel “empty.”	Compares work with outline, translates English sentences back into Chinese to verify accuracy.	Both use self-evaluation techniques.	Pearl focuses more on content; Lily emphasizes alignment with the outline.
Revising	Engages in ongoing revisions, rethinking sentence structures and exploring alternative expressions.	Revises by adding details and modifying phrases for clarity, focuses on minor changes rather than deeper restructuring.	Both revise content during writing.	Lily's revisions are less in-depth compared to Pearl's.
Final Review	Lacks a systematic approach to the final review, often skips re-reading the entire essay.	Translates back into Chinese to verify meaning but may focus too much on structure over accuracy.	Both exhibit inconsistent final review practices.	Pearl misses a full final review, while Lily emphasizes structure over grammar.

During monitoring, both Pearl and Lily practiced active self-monitoring but with different focuses. Pearl prioritized vocabulary refinement and adjusted strategies mid-process, while Lily focused on structural coherence and meeting task requirements. Pearl’s inconsistent time management and overthinking slowed her progress, whereas Lily balanced planning and execution effectively. Emotionally, Pearl coped with frustration by simplifying ideas, reflecting greater strain, while Lily managed anxiety through short breaks and a fresh mindset. Overall, Pearl’s approach was more emotionally taxing and language-focused, while Lily maintained a structured, time-conscious, and emotionally balanced writing process. For instance, Pearl described feeling “painful and frustrated” when encountering language barriers and resorted to using simpler synonyms to overcome difficulties. In contrast, Lily reported that taking a short break allowed her to “refresh my thinking” and re-approach problems with a clearer mind. Table 7 presents the similarities and differences in the two participants’ monitoring behaviors, emphasizing self-monitoring, theme management, and strategies for emotional coping.

Table 7: Comparison of Participants' Monitoring

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Self-Monitoring	Regularly assesses progress, adjusts strategies, and reconsiders word choices.	Consistently monitors writing process, ensuring essay meets length requirements and aligns with the plan.	Both practice active self-monitoring.	Pearl focuses on vocabulary choices; Lily emphasizes meeting structure and length requirements.
Time Management	Displays inconsistent time management, sometimes overthinks during drafting.	Allocates significant time to planning, balancing planning and execution carefully.	Both manage their writing time.	Lily is more structured in time allocation.
Emotional Coping	Feels frustration and fatigue, uses substitution and simplification as coping strategies.	Manages anxiety by taking breaks and re-approaching problems with fresh perspective.	Both manage emotional challenges.	Pearl often feels frustrated, while Lily uses short breaks to reduce anxiety.

In summary, both Pearl and Lily followed a structured four-phase writing process characterized by planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring. While they exhibited similar strategies, including bilingual thinking, verbal rehearsal, and self-monitoring, key differences emerged in their approaches. Pearl demonstrated greater flexibility in modifying ideas, engaged in deeper revisions, and focused on vocabulary refinement, while Lily adhered more strictly to her initial outline, maintained structural consistency, and emphasized meeting task requirements. These differences underscore the need for tailored instructional approaches that encourage adaptability in planning, deeper content revisions, and effective coping strategies to enhance writing performance among EFL learners. Table 8 provides a brief summary of the participants' writing processes.

Table 8: Summary of Participants' Writing Processes

Aspect	Similarities	Differences
Planning	Both use structured planning and bilingual thinking.	Pearl relies more on translation; Lily uses more visual tools.
Writing	Both translate ideas from Chinese to English and rehearse aloud.	Pearl's process is more iterative; Lily adheres more strictly to her outline.
Reviewing	Both engage in self-evaluation and revision.	Pearl's revisions are deeper, but she lacks a full final review, while Lily focuses on structure over grammar.
Monitoring	Both actively monitor their writing and manage emotional challenges.	Pearl experiences more frustration; Lily uses proactive relaxation strategies.

Writing Strategies Used

The analysis of Pearl and Lily’s writing strategies was conducted using a structured framework, encompassing goal-setting, planning, drafting, rehearsing, problem-solving, transcribing, reviewing, revising, and monitoring. While both participants employed a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, notable differences emerged in the ways they approached and executed these strategies.

In goal-setting, both Pearl and Lily established clear objectives and identified key arguments. Pearl translated essay topics into Chinese for better comprehension, while Lily underlined key terms to maintain thematic focus. During planning, both used bilingual thinking to generate ideas and create outlines. Pearl drafted outlines in both languages, allowing flexibility during drafting, whereas Lily strictly followed a “general-specific-general” structure, using visual tools for organization. While both showed structured planning, Pearl’s approach was more adaptable and dynamic, whereas Lily’s strict adherence to her initial structure limited flexibility. For instance, Pearl translated the topic “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Society” into Chinese and used this translation to refine her outline. Lily, meanwhile, underlined key phrases such as “importance of AI” to ensure that her essay remained focused on the core theme. Table 9 presents the similarities and differences in the two participants’ use of goal-setting strategies in writing.

Table 9: Comparison of Participants’ Goal-setting Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Goal-setting	Translates essay topics into Chinese, sets clear goals, and aligns content with essay structure.	Clarifies objectives by underlining key terms and maintaining focus on the central theme.	Both set structured goals for writing.	Pearl uses translation for comprehension; Lily uses visual cues.

In idea generation (see Table 10), both Pearl and Lily used structured guidelines like “Firstly” and “Secondly” to ensure logical flow. Pearl relied on pre-learned templates and often used verbal fillers, reflecting her tendency to think aloud, while Lily maintained a more structured, linear approach. Both used verbalization techniques to refine ideas: Pearl rehearsed phrases to build vocabulary confidence, whereas Lily tested sentences in both Chinese and English to ensure coherence and alignment with her outline. Though similar in strategy, Pearl focused more on vocabulary reinforcement, while Lily prioritized structural consistency. For example, Pearl frequently rehearsed the phrase “pay more attention” aloud to reinforce her confidence in its accuracy, while Lily tested the sentence “AI can help save time” in both languages to confirm structural correctness.

Table 10: Comparison of Participants’ Idea Generation Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
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Planning	Drafts outlines in both Chinese and English, flexible with changes during writing.	Uses a bilingual approach, visual cues like underlining, and a structured "general-specific-general" format.	Both use outlines and bilingual thinking.	Pearl is more adaptable; Lily uses more structured visual tools.
Flexibility	Allows ideas to evolve, changes plans as needed.	Follows the outline strictly, less flexible in idea generation.	Both set clear plans but with different flexibility.	Lily adheres closely to the outline; Pearl adapts during writing.

During drafting, both Pearl and Lily used outlines but differed in flexibility. Pearl’s outlines were adaptable, allowing dynamic idea changes, while Lily strictly followed her plan for structural consistency. Both used note-taking: Pearl mixed Chinese and English to aid translation and idea generation, while Lily jotted key points and expanded them sequentially. For content organization, both used transitional phrases for coherence; Pearl favored words like “Firstly” and “Secondly,” while Lily expanded short phrases into full sentences. Pearl’s approach offered adaptability, whereas Lily’s method ensured a more linear and consistent draft. For example, Pearl’s initial outline for an essay on environmental protection included phrases like “firstly, raise awareness” and “secondly, implement laws,” which she later adjusted to include more detailed explanations. Lily, however, maintained her original plan, expanding phrases such as “AI is valuable” into full sentences without deviating from her initial structure. Table 11 shows how the two participants used drafting strategies when writing expository essays.

Table 11: Comparison of Participants’ Drafting Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Using Guidelines	Employs pre-learned templates like "Firstly," "Secondly," and "In addition" for logical flow.	Relies on structured methods such as “firstly,” “secondly,” “besides” to maintain argument logic.	Both use structured guidelines for idea generation.	Pearl uses more verbal fillers ("um," "er"); Lily uses consistent transitions.
Verbalizing	Practices phrases aloud to refine clarity and accuracy.	Tests sentences aloud in both languages before writing them down.	Both verbalize ideas for clarity.	Pearl often repeats phrases for confidence; Lily uses verbalization to test structure.

Rehearsing played a crucial role in both participants’ writing processes, with a focus on sentence and phrase rehearsal to ensure linguistic accuracy. Pearl repeatedly practiced key sentences and phrases aloud to refine clarity and build confidence in her vocabulary choices. Lily, similarly, practiced sentences aloud in both languages to test their structural coherence before committing them to paper. While both participants

engaged in verbal rehearsal, Pearl's focus on repetition reflected her desire to build confidence in language use, whereas Lily's emphasis on structural coherence underscored her commitment to maintaining alignment with her initial plan. Additionally, both participants addressed spelling challenges by practicing difficult words. Pearl focused on practicing words such as "measures" and "harmony" to improve spelling accuracy, while Lily repeatedly wrote challenging words like "necessary" to reinforce correct spelling. This emphasis on spelling rehearsal highlights both participants' awareness of the importance of linguistic accuracy in their written work. Table 12 illustrates how the participants employed the rehearsing strategy to manage outlining, note-taking, and content organization.

Table 12: Comparison of Participants Rehearsing Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Outlining	Creates flexible outlines, uses bilingual notes to guide writing.	Drafts key concepts and uses a step-by-step approach to maintain clarity.	Both create outlines to guide their essays.	Pearl's outlines are more adaptable; Lily uses outlines to ensure strict structure.
Note-Taking	Mixes Chinese and English in drafts to facilitate translation.	Uses draft paper to jot down key points and maintain logical flow.	Both use note-taking to support drafting.	Pearl uses bilingual notes; Lily uses visual notes.
Organizing Content	Maintains a logical flow using transitional phrases, adapts content to improve coherence.	Expands short phrases into full sentences, ensuring arguments align with the outline.	Both organize content logically.	Pearl often reorders ideas; Lily follows a set order.

When facing challenges, both Pearl and Lily used problem-solving strategies. Pearl simplified complex ideas through synonyms and paraphrasing to maintain fluency, while Lily reduced sentence complexity to handle vocabulary limitations and preserve structural consistency. Both also used models: Pearl adapted pre-learned patterns flexibly to fit her needs, whereas Lily consistently applied familiar templates like "First, Second, Besides" to build coherence. Although both effectively used these strategies, Pearl's approach was more adaptive and dynamic, while Lily's focused on consistency and adherence to established structures. For instance, Pearl adapted a pre-learned model to transform the phrase "protecting the environment is important" into a more detailed statement about policy implementation, while Lily maintained the original structure of her template to present a logical argument. Table 13 illustrates how the participants used problem-solving and reduction strategies, including sentence rehearsing, spelling rehearsing, reduction, and model use.

Table 13: Comparison of Participants Problem-solving Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Sentence Rehearsing	Repeats sentences and phrases aloud to improve clarity.	Practices sentences aloud to ensure accuracy and natural expression.	Both rehearse verbally to refine ideas.	Pearl focuses on repetition; Lily tests for structure.
Spelling Rehearsing	Practices difficult words such as "measures" and "harmony."	Repeatedly writes challenging words like "necessary" to avoid spelling errors.	Both address spelling challenges through rehearsal.	Pearl focuses on vocabulary; Lily practices specific spelling.
Reduction	Simplifies complex ideas into simpler terms to maintain clarity.	Uses a reduction technique when facing vocabulary challenges, prioritizes clarity.	Both simplify ideas when needed.	Pearl uses simpler synonyms; Lily adjusts sentence structure.
Using Models	Relies on pre-learned templates and models to construct sentences.	Uses familiar structures like "First, Second, Besides" to build coherent arguments.	Both use pre-learned models to aid writing.	Pearl adapts models more dynamically; Lily uses them consistently.

In the reviewing phase, both Pearl and Lily engaged in self-evaluation and revision but with different focuses. Pearl refined content by questioning point necessity and rephrasing for depth, while Lily compared her draft to her outline, translating sentences to ensure structural accuracy. Pearl’s revisions were dynamic, involving significant changes to vocabulary, structure, and coherence, whereas Lily’s were surface-level, adjusting phrases and adding minor details. Although both demonstrated commitment to self-evaluation, Pearl focused on enriching ideas, while Lily prioritized maintaining alignment with her original plan. For example, Pearl revised the sentence “the environmental trouble has become more and more worse” to “the environmental problem has become more and more serious,” demonstrating a focus on linguistic refinement. Lily, meanwhile, translated sentences back into Chinese to ensure they matched her intended meaning, emphasizing structural alignment over content depth. Table 14 illustrates how the participants employed reviewing and revising strategies during expository essay writing.

Table 14: Comparison of Participants Reviewing and Revising Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Evaluating	Questions necessity of points, rephrases unclear sentences.	Compares work with outline, translates sentences back to Chinese to check accuracy.	Both evaluate their work during writing.	Pearl evaluates content depth; Lily checks structural alignment.
Revising	Engages in adaptive revisions, making changes to vocabulary and sentence structure.	Revises content by adding details, often focusing on minor changes rather than deeper restructuring.	Both revise content for clarity.	Pearl's revisions are deeper; Lily focuses on word choice.

Both participants demonstrated active self-monitoring, but with different focuses. Pearl regularly assessed vocabulary choices and adjusted strategies for coherence, while Lily ensured her writing met length requirements and aligned with her outline. Emotionally, Pearl coped with frustration by simplifying ideas to manage cognitive load, reflecting greater strain. In contrast, Lily took short breaks to refresh and re-approach challenges, helping her maintain composure and focus. While both used effective coping strategies, Pearl’s approach centered on language refinement under emotional pressure, whereas Lily prioritized structure and emotional balance. For instance, Pearl described feeling “painful and frustrated” when encountering language barriers and resorted to using simpler synonyms to overcome difficulties. Lily, however, managed her anxiety by taking short breaks, stating that this technique allowed her to “refresh her thinking” and re-approach problems with greater clarity. Table 15 presents how the participants monitored their writing processes and managed emotional stress.

Table 15: Comparison of Participants Monitoring Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Self-Monitoring	Tracks progress, adapts strategies, and manages vocabulary retrieval.	Monitors writing process, ensuring essay meets length and structure requirements.	Both monitor progress and adjust strategies.	Pearl manages cognitive load; Lily balances planning and execution.
Emotional Management	Takes short pauses when fatigued, uses simple language to cope with stress.	Uses short breaks to manage anxiety and re-approach problems with a fresh perspective.	Both use breaks to manage writing anxiety.	Pearl substitutes simpler language; Lily re-evaluates with a fresh perspective.

Discussion

This study explored the expository essay writing processes and strategies of two Chinese EFL non-English major students, Pearl and Lily. Through a detailed analysis of their writing behaviors, it was found that both participants engaged in a four-phase recursive writing process—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—consistent with Flower and Hayes’ (1981) cognitive composing model. However, individual differences in their strategy use revealed varying levels of effectiveness.

Both Pearl and Lily established structured plans before writing, reflecting Wenden’s (1991) identification of goal-setting as a key metacognitive strategy. Pearl frequently translated essay topics into Chinese to enhance her understanding, a practice recognized by Arndt (1987) as useful for scaffolding comprehension. However, Pearl’s heavy reliance on her first language (L1) often slowed idea generation and diminished her fluency in the second language (L2), a drawback cautioned by Victori (1995). In contrast,

Lily underlined key English terms and visually mapped her ideas, demonstrating stronger autonomous cognitive engagement, consistent with Williams' (2003) Phase Model. Her planning approach helped her maintain thematic focus and coherence throughout her writing. Overall, Lily's strategy of visual mapping and direct engagement with the L2 proved more effective for producing coherent essays than Pearl's translation-heavy method.

During the drafting stage, both participants employed verbal rehearsal—repeating sentences aloud—a strategy shown by Arndt (1987) and Abdel Latif (2021) to enhance linguistic accuracy. Pearl's flexible “talk-writing” approach encouraged deeper reflection but often led to fragmented drafting and inefficiency, echoing Kellogg's (1996) findings on the effects of working memory overload. In contrast, Lily's strict adherence to her outline fostered greater coherence and fluency, though it constrained the development of new ideas, aligning with Chien's (2012) observation that rigid outlines can limit creativity. Thus, while Lily's structured drafting process enhanced fluency and coherence, Pearl's more flexible method promoted content richness, albeit at the cost of drafting efficiency.

In the revision process, Pearl engaged in dynamic, global revisions, frequently restructuring sentences and enriching content—behaviors characteristic of proficient writers, as noted by Victori (1995). Conversely, Lily focused primarily on surface-level corrections, such as grammar and word choice, consistent with Xu and Qi's (2017) findings on exam-oriented revision practices among Chinese EFL learners. Pearl's deep revision strategies proved more effective for enhancing content depth, whereas Lily's surface-level revisions, while maintaining structural consistency, limited opportunities for deeper content development.

Both participants also employed self-monitoring strategies, a core component of effective writing identified by Wenden (1991) and Abdel Latif (2021). Pearl actively monitored her vocabulary choices but often experienced emotional frustration, leading her to simplify her language under stress—a coping behavior aligned with Guo and Huang's (2020) findings. In contrast, Lily demonstrated stronger emotional regulation by taking short cognitive breaks to enhance focus and maintain steady progress, a technique recommended by Xu (2018). Consequently, Lily's emotional management strategies were more effective in sustaining writing quality and coherence, whereas Pearl's emotional struggles occasionally compromised her writing fluency and depth.

The participants' strategic behaviors revealed distinct profiles in terms of overall effectiveness. Pearl demonstrated notable strengths in flexible idea generation, dynamic revisions, and content enrichment. Her ability to generate ideas freely and revise extensively contributed to richer essay content. However, these strengths were offset by weaknesses in time management, fragmented drafting, and emotional strain, which sometimes disrupted her writing fluency and organization. Thus, Pearl's writing process was moderately

effective: although she excelled at enriching ideas and adding depth to her essays, her performance was limited by emotional and organizational challenges.

In contrast, Lily exhibited strengths in maintaining structural coherence, managing time efficiently, and exercising strong emotional control. Her strict adherence to planned outlines enabled her to produce essays that were coherent and well-organized, and her ability to regulate emotions through short cognitive breaks helped her sustain focus and quality throughout the writing process. Nevertheless, Lily's rigid structuring sometimes restricted her creativity and limited the depth of content development. Overall, Lily's writing approach proved highly effective for producing coherent and efficient essays, even though it slightly constrained the expansion and flexibility of her ideas.

The findings confirm that effective writing strategy use requires a balance between clear planning, dynamic revision, emotional regulation, and systematic monitoring. Neither complete rigidity nor unrestricted flexibility alone ensures writing success. Pearl's case highlights the benefits of adaptability and deep revision, but also underscores the necessity of stronger emotional regulation and more efficient time management. Lily's case exemplifies the advantages of structure, disciplined planning, and emotional resilience, though occasionally at the expense of creativity. Overall, both participants' experiences corroborate the theoretical insights of Flower and Hayes (1981), Wenden (1991), and Abdel Latif (2021), emphasizing that successful L2 writing depends not only on cognitive and linguistic strategies but also on robust self-regulation and effective emotional management.

Implications

The findings underscore the pedagogical need to integrate metacognitive strategy instruction into EFL writing curricula. Explicit training in goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflective evaluation can enhance students' ability to regulate their writing independently. Teachers should embed these strategies within writing tasks to develop learners' awareness of their thinking and planning across composition stages. The recursive and non-linear nature of writing observed suggests that instruction should move beyond rigid product-based models, promoting flexible processes involving continual planning, drafting, and revision. This approach helps learners build confidence and engage in deeper, more meaningful revisions. The use of bilingual thinking and code-switching during idea generation highlights the value of scaffolding the L1 strategically to support L2 output while guiding students toward greater fluency.

Affective factors such as frustration, anxiety, and fatigue significantly impacted performance, pointing to the importance of emotional coping strategies like mindfulness, time management, and cognitive breaks. Incorporating technological tools—such as AI-powered writing assistants, grammar checkers, and peer review platforms—can further support learners by offering real-time feedback and fostering independence.

Finally, the contrast between the two participants emphasizes the importance of individualized instruction. Recognizing learners' diverse strategic preferences and emotional dispositions, educators should provide differentiated scaffolding, varied writing models, and personalized feedback. Such an approach enables students to build on their strengths while addressing areas for growth, ultimately fostering more effective and confident EFL writers.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of understanding individual variation in EFL learners' expository essay writing processes and strategies. While both participants engaged in recursive writing stages—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—their distinct approaches reveal that effective writing development is not uniform but shaped by personal habits, emotional responses, and strategic preferences. Pearl demonstrated flexibility and deeper content engagement but struggled with emotional regulation and time management, whereas Lily excelled in structural coherence and self-regulation, albeit with limited creative expansion. These findings suggest that effective writing pedagogy must go beyond formulaic instruction, incorporating process-oriented, strategy-based, and emotionally supportive frameworks.

The study contributes to the ongoing development of writing models by offering insights into how non-English majors manage the cognitive and affective demands of L2 writing. Pedagogically, it calls for an emphasis on metacognitive training, emotional support, and technological integration to scaffold learners' development. Future research should examine broader participant samples and longitudinal impacts of tailored instructional interventions, as well as the cultural-linguistic dynamics that influence strategy use. Ultimately, fostering adaptable, reflective, and emotionally resilient writers requires a comprehensive and student-centered approach to writing instruction.

Author Contributions

Conghui Wang led the data collection, transcription, and initial analysis of the participants' writing processes and strategies. Aini Akmar Mohd Kasim supervised the research design, provided methodological guidance, and contributed to the interpretation of findings. Noor Hanim Rahmat assisted in refining the conceptual framework, validating the qualitative coding, and reviewing the manuscript structure and coherence. All authors contributed to the writing and critical revision of the final manuscript and approved the submitted version.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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