# A Mixed-Methods Study on the Challenges of Academic Writing in Chinese for Native English Speakers

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**Abstract**
An increasing number of English learners are entering the higher education sequence in China, and the issue of how these students can conduct Chinese academic writing in a standardized manner has become a widely discussed topic in academic circles. Although existing research has extensively discussed this, many English learners are in the stage of interdisciplinary learning, where related studies are less common. This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining focus groups, questionnaire surveys, and structured interviews to delve into the experiences and challenges of students with Chinese as a second language in academic writing. The findings reveal various factors that affect students' academic writing experiences, including previous learning experiences, dissertation supervisors/school writing guidance institutions, structural differences between languages, and the impact of the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK). These findings offer new perspectives on understanding the issues encountered by native English speakers in the Chinese academic environment and provide valuable insights for designing relevant guidance programs and teaching strategies.

**Keywords**
Chinese for specific purposes, Chinese academic writing, difficulty analysis, mixed research methods

## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by globalization, the field of academic writing has witnessed a growing diversity, especially with the increasing instances of academic paper composition in Mandarin Chinese as a second language. Academic papers, as knowledge outputs of researchers, are distinguished by their register from other genres, showcasing a unique academic nature. Register, as a pragmatic paradigm formed under specific language use functions, reflects the specificity of texts in structure and function (Ding Jinguo, 2009). In recent years, the academic community has extensively explored whether register features in non-academic texts find their correspondence in academic papers (Atkinson, 1999; Biber & Gray, 2016; Hyland & Jiang, 2016; Liardét et al., 2019). However, comparative research on the similarities and

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differences in the use of register features among different academic groups remains scarce. Although English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research began later in China, approximately 30 years behind Western countries, its research outcomes have been considerably rich.

Over the past two decades, as English has increasingly become the lingua franca for international research and education (Hyland, 2013), non-English-speaking countries have widely adopted English language proficiency tests in higher education institutions to assess students whose mother tongue is not English or who have not studied in English-medium institutions, to address the challenges brought by linguistic conflicts (Hayes & Read, 2004). In the UK, Australia, Canada, China, and other places, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has become a widely accepted English proficiency test, often used as a reference standard for admissions to academic programs (Read & Hayes, 2003). Correspondingly, in China, the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) plays a similar role.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs an academic cultural methodology, viewing writing as a social practice involving epistemological and identity construction aspects, rather than merely an isolated skill (Lea & Street, 1998). This methodology stems from the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement (Gee, 2000; Street, 1984), initially applied to the context of English as a second language but equally pertinent to the Chinese as a second language learning context. It scrutinizes the writing process of students from a educational background perspective, considering their linguistic backgrounds and sociocultural identities, and recognizes that integrating these students into the academic culture mediated by a second language goes far beyond simply introducing institutional practices (Lea, 2004). By exploring the experiences of international students' academic writing from the perspective of academic cultural methodology, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how students can be better prepared for academic writing in Chinese, particularly in the context of undergraduate studies in higher education institutions. The study accommodates the diversity of student backgrounds and the multicultural characteristics of multidisciplinary academic requirements, thus aligning with the concept of academic culture, emphasizing the significance of the author over the text itself. The core research question of this study is: How can second language learners in higher education institutions more effectively prepare for academic writing in Chinese during their undergraduate studies?

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, rooted in the constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This paradigm posits that multiple realities are constructed through individuals' lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). Lincoln et al. (2011) further elaborate that the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm views knowledge as co-constructed through interactions among individuals within social contexts (Crotty, 1998).

The research process commenced with a qualitative exploration in three focus groups with five students using a set of indicative questions (see Appendix 1) to identify challenges encountered during the writing process. Based on the preliminary findings from the focus groups, a detailed questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was designed by the research team and distributed via Wechat to participants willing to take part in the questionnaire segment of the study. Following the questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 3) were conducted with participants who volunteered for follow-up interviews during the questionnaire completion. These interviews aimed to delve deeper into the participants' responses to the questionnaire questions, to garner richer data.

The research findings revealed three main themes: The first theme focuses on students' past learning experiences, particularly the impact of the age at which they began learning Chinese on their language capabilities, with older learners having lower confidence in writing; the second theme pertains to students' experiences within the learning environment, including their views on the support provided by writing guidance services personnel, as well as the level of importance they attach to such support. Students commonly reported a lack of tangible help from the support offered in universities and did not highly evaluate this type of assistance. The third theme is about the linguistic ontology itself, with

differences between Chinese and English in pronunciation, orthography, structure, and word order constituting challenges in academic writing.

In terms of data analysis, this study's analytical process aimed for triangulation and was divided into three interconnected stages. To ensure that the generation of quantitative data was based on the qualitative data obtained from the focus groups, the questionnaire was designed through the answers provided by early focus group participants. Efforts were made to ensure the continuity and consistency of the data, in line with the research methodology of Hopson, Lucas, and Peterson (2000). We invited different professionals related to this field to independently name the data, then convened to discuss and re-encode the names. The analysis of interview transcripts also followed the same steps. Subsequently, by examining descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, and item analysis were conducted to assess the dimensionality and internal consistency of the multiple questions in the questionnaire, and correlations among various measures were checked. Finally, the results of the quantitative data analysis were triangulated with the qualitative findings to ensure the reliability and validity of the research outcomes.
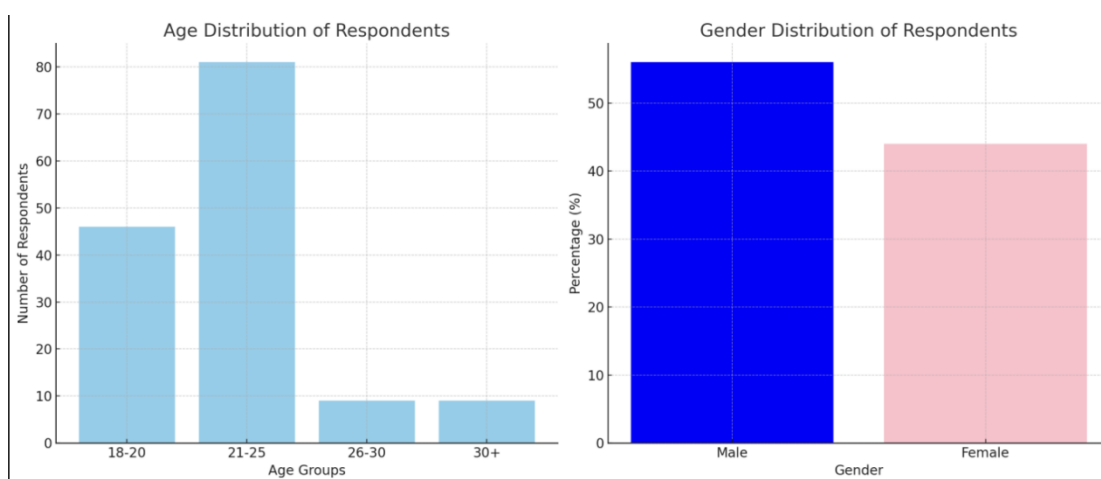
Table 1

*Focus Group Member Information*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Nationality | Degree |
|-----------|--------|-------------|--------|
| F2 | F | USA | |
| F3 | M | UK | |
| F4 | F | NZ | Bachelor degree |
| M1 | M | CAN | |
| M2 | F | AUS | |

## 3. Survey Results

Figure 1

*Age and Gender Distribution of Respondents to the Questionnaire*



The survey garnered a total of 166 responses, out of which 145 were valid. In terms of the distribution of respondents, male students constituted approximately 56% of the total responses received, female students constituted approximately 44% of the total responses received.The highest proportion of respondents were aged between 21 to 25 years (n = 81), followed by those between 18 to 20 years (n

= 46), 26 to 30 years (n = 9), and over 30 years (n = 9). Figure 1 depicts the number of respondents from each English-speaking country. The respondents represented many fields of study. The majority of respondents (n = 54) were studying engineering. Other major fields included science (n = 18), business (n = 33), education (n = 40), among others.Although exploratory principal axis factor analysis indicated a single-dimensional factor structure, we decided to divide the items into two aspects for conceptual reasons.Item analysis was conducted on multiple items in the questionnaire to assess the consistency of respondents' perceptions of academic writing in Chinese and their adopted writing strategies. The item analysis revealed a Cronbach's α of .89, indicating relatively high internal consistency among the items.
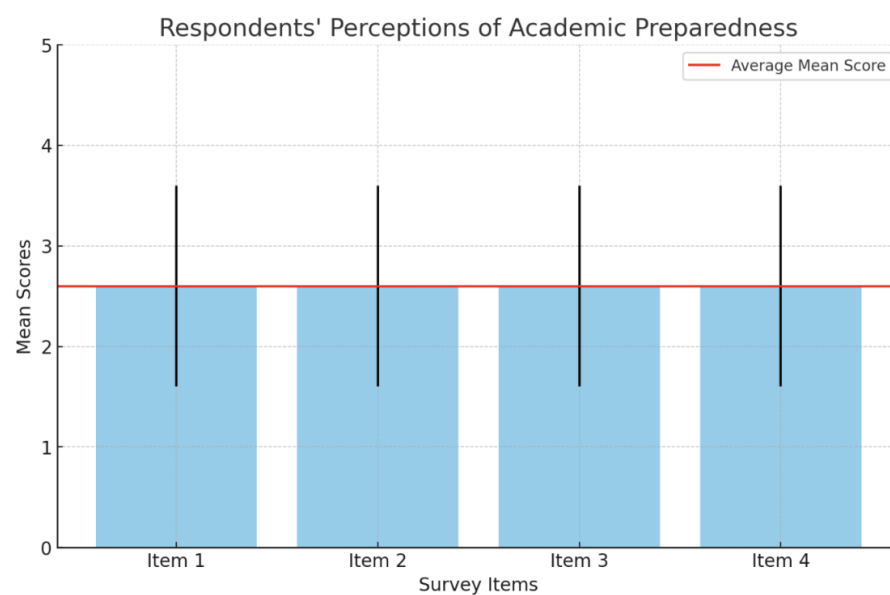
Figure 2

*Respondents' Distribution of Subject Areas*
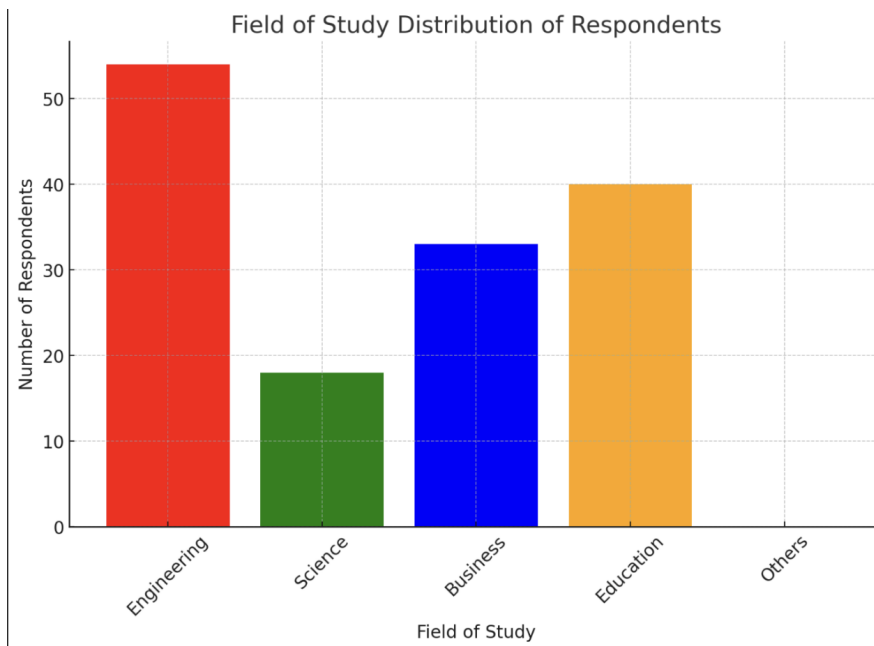


## 3.1Past Academic Experience and Academic Writing

Figure 31

*Respondents' Perceptions of Academic Preparedness*

This aspect(α = .80) focused on whether respondents believed that their past academic experiences provided them with the skills necessary for writing and learning in institutions where Chinese is the medium of instruction (see items 1, 2, 3, 4 in Appendix 2). Students felt that their past academic experiences did not prepare them for the demands of academic language (M = 2.60, SD = 1.00). A moderately weak yet significant negative correlation was found between the age at which respondents began learning Chinese and their past academic experiences, $r(152) = -.24$, $p < .01$. This result suggests that the older the respondents were when they started learning English at school, the less prepared they felt by their past academic experiences.

## 3.2 Confidence in Writing Ability

The second aspect(α = .83) was based on respondents' confidence in their ability to write in Chinese according to academic standards (see items 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 in Appendix 2). Respondents reported a neutral response regarding their confidence in Chinese academic writing ability (M = 2.88, SD = 0.95). There was a significant negative correlation between the age at which respondents began learning Chinese and their confidence in Chinese writing ability, $r(152) = -.20$, $p = .01$. The older the respondents were when they started learning Chinese at school, the lower their confidence in being able to write academically in Chinese. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between respondents' HSK writing scores and their confidence level in academic writing ability, $r(133) = .22$, $p = .01$. Higher HSK writing scores were associated with greater confidence in Chinese writing ability among respondents.

Figure 4

*Confidence in Chinese Academic Writing Ability*
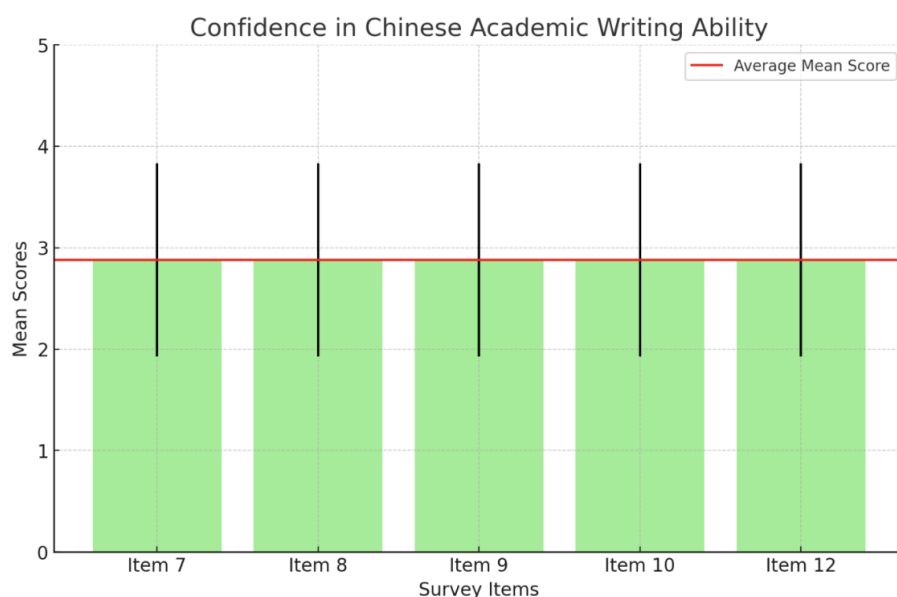


The survey investigated the actions students take to cope with difficulties in academic writing. The preferred option chosen by respondents was "seeking help from classmates," which aligns with findings from the focus groups that students tend to ask for help from friends to meet academic writing demands.

Two open-ended questions asked students about the challenges they face and what they think would be most helpful to them. While open-ended questions in questionnaires typically generate a large number of unanswered items (Reja et al., 2003), the response rate for these two open-ended questions was significant: up to 98 responses were received. It appears that challenges faced by native English-speaking students in writing can be categorized into two types. The first type involves the text itself, including academic vocabulary, spelling, structure, and style.

The second type involves challenges related to background knowledge, affecting the composition of the text. Students noted that assuming the HSK scores they obtained meant they were fully prepared for the academic writing challenges they would face was mistaken. Some pointed out that the HSK course was "unrelated" to the writing they did for their university courses. Respondents seemed to agree that providing timely and clear feedback on students' writing is the main help that instructors can offer.

Furthermore, five respondents said that instructors should also clearly outline their expectations for writing in the subject at the start of the learning journey. Students pointed out that instructors could help them improve their writing by providing "writing models."

Then, through deeper exploration with students who voluntarily participated in interviews, the questionnaire findings were further explored.

## 4. Interview Results

Subsequently, twenty interviews were conducted with male and female English undergraduate students from various higher education institutions in China. The average duration of each interview was 30 minutes. Although there was a set of indicative questions (see Appendix 3), researchers encouraged participants to contribute to the discussion in the interviews as they wished. The interview analysis revealed that the challenges students faced in academic writing could be attributed to educational background and linguistic factors.

### 4.1 Educational background Challenges

The students did not believe their prior language learning experiences in public schools were sufficient to equip them for studies in Chinese-speaking environments. Consistent with findings from focus groups and the survey, several interviewees felt underprepared for the academic demands of higher education in China. Approximately 80% of the interviewees had attended public schools. Despite being from various English-speaking countries, they remarked that the quality of Chinese language instruction in their home countries' public schools was inadequate for equipping students with the Chinese language skills necessary for studying in Chinese-speaking nations.

### 4.2 Educational Disparities

Participants from different university levels and disciplines appeared to struggle with deciphering acceptable conventions of academic writing in Chinese. Some participants seemed to primarily associate the formality of academic writing with the mechanical aspects of the text, such as punctuation and spelling.

Moreover, students' confusion seemed to increase when there was a gap between how to write for the academy and what instructors assume students know about these writing practices. Participants mentioned that good academic writing in Chinese depended on individual instructors' preferences, which seemed to lead to some participants' ambivalence towards academic writing.

Consistent with findings from open-ended questions in the survey, participants expressed a need for writing models, which could better prepare them mentally for academic writing needs and enable them to ask questions before beginning the writing process.

To address the uncertainty in academic writing, participants adopted several strategies, one of which was seeking help from friends. This aligns with findings from focus groups and surveys. These peers could be international students currently studying the same course or those who had completed it. Some participants mentioned that they preferred to have Chinese-speaking friends proofread their writing, while others said they would turn to friends from the same cultural background, as they felt more comfortable explaining their needs to peers with a shared background.

Another strategy was to seek writing assistance from institutional services within the school. Most participants were aware of their university's provision of free academic writing support, workshops, and one-on-one sessions. Four participants had consulted with them, expressing a desire to talk to someone within their higher education institution to clarify many vague concepts about the standards for writing assignments.

While more than half of the interviewees did not consult about their writing, discussions with participants revealed a common assumption that the support provided within the school was mostly generic, designed to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their discipline. While problem areas in students' writing might be emphasized, some participants seemed to misunderstand the institution's role in helping them cope with academic language demands. They appeared to expect the institution to correct all mistakes for them, rather than outline how they could improve their writing.

### 4.3 Linguistic Challenges

Our survey results indicated that differences between Chinese and English seemed to present challenges to students' writing in Chinese. This was echoed in the interviews, where participants believed they faced challenges at the lexical and sentence levels when writing in Chinese.

At the lexical level, some participants noted that morphological differences between Chinese and English caused difficulties in second language writing. One of the most significant differences, the complex morphological structure, was confusing to them. Several participants pointed out that different pronunciations for writing also caused writing difficulties, as some letters are silent in English, which is not the case in Chinese writing, and they considered spelling a major challenge in Chinese writing. At the sentence level, differences in sentence patterns, such as repetition, word order, the use of definite articles, and word order, were issues commonly discussed in international Chinese education and were also reflected in this survey.

## 5. Conclusions

This mixed-methods research investigated the experiences of native English-speaking students facing academic writing demands within the Chinese higher education context. The findings suggest that linguistic differences between Chinese and English pose challenges to students writing in Chinese. However, it appears that students' difficulties may be exacerbated by the attitudes and practices of disciplinary instructors. Furthermore, a lack of collaboration between disciplinary instructors and the writing support offered within institutions seems to hinder these students' progress.

While the sample of this study represented multiple English-speaking countries, it is unlikely to fully represent the total population. Additionally, we only heard from students and did not interview teachers within higher education institutions to gain further insights into their experiences providing writing support for English-speaking students. These are two potential areas for future academic research.

Developing academic writing skills is a lengthy process that requires time, and students need time to acquire the necessary knowledge to be able to produce texts that meet the expectations of their disciplines. Therefore, more longitudinal studies are needed to gain deeper insights into the writing experiences of native English-speaking undergraduates throughout their entire academic program.

## Notes

1. The bar chart above illustrates the respondents' perceptions of their academic preparedness for writing and learning in institutions where Chinese is the medium of instruction, as measured by four survey items. Each item received an average mean score of 2.60, indicating that students felt their

past academic experiences did not adequately prepare them for the demands of academic language. The standard deviation for each item is represented by the error bars, showing a value of 1.00. The red horizontal line marks the average mean score across the items, further emphasizing the overall sentiment of underpreparedness. This visual representation highlights the significant negative correlation between the age at which respondents began learning Chinese and their feelings of preparedness, suggesting that those who started learning Chinese later felt less prepared.

2. The bar chart above displays the respondents' confidence in their ability to write in Chinese according to academic standards, based on five survey items. Each item received an average mean score of 2.88, indicating a neutral response regarding their confidence in Chinese academic writing ability. The error bars, representing a standard deviation of 0.95 for each item, illustrate the variability in respondents' confidence levels. The red horizontal line highlights the average mean score across the items, underscoring the overall neutral sentiment towards their confidence in academic writing in Chinese. This visualization also encapsulates the significant negative correlation between the age at which respondents began learning Chinese and their confidence in writing academically in Chinese, as well as the significant positive correlation between respondents' HSK writing scores and their confidence levels. Higher HSK writing scores were associated with greater confidence among respondents.

## Appendix 1: Indicative Questions for Focus Groups

Can you tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What did you study before coming to China? What are you studying now in China? Why did you choose this program? Why did you decide to come to China?

How old were you when you started learning Chinese as a foreign language?

How do you find the way of learning here compared to your previous learning experiences? For example: What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Is there a particular genre of writing (reports/essays/lab reports) that you do more frequently?

How do you go about writing a paper? Tell me about your writing process.

How often do you communicate with a teacher who guides your writing, seeking help with Chinese academic writing?

Do you receive help from others (friends, lecturers, writing center)? If so, do you think it has helped you progress in your writing?

What difficulties do you encounter/have you encountered in the writing you do for your undergraduate courses?

Do you think your previous learning experiences have prepared you for the demands of writing in Chinese in China?

Did you usually receive feedback from your teachers at school on your writing? If so, do you think it was helpful in developing your writing skills?

What measures do you take to help you overcome the difficulties you face in writing?

Is there anything else you would like to say about academic writing?

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Demographic Information
- Gender □ Male □ Female □ I prefer not to disclose
- Age □ 18-20 □ 21-25 □ 26-29 □ 30+
- Nationality ........................................

- Highest academic qualification obtained

□ Undergraduate □ Graduate □ High school □ Other .................................

- Have you taken any international standardized language tests? Yes □ No □

□ IELTS □ TOEFL □  HSK □ Other .................................

- IELTS score ........................................

- TOEFL score ........................................

- HSK score ........................................

- Other, score ........................................

- IELTS/TOEFL/HSK Other writing score ........................................

- Duration of stay in China (e.g., months ................................. / .............. years)

- Have you ever studied any qualification/course in a Chinese-speaking country other than China? Which country?

- If yes, how long did you stay in that country?

- How old were you when you started learning Chinese? ........................................

- Higher education institution in China ........................................

- Major ........................................

- University year ........................................


Please rate the following statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

1. Chinese writing skills were emphasized during my schooling.

2. The amount of Chinese instruction at school did not equip me with the ability to write in Chinese.

3. I received feedback from my school teachers on my Chinese writing.

4. Overall, I think my prior education in my home country did not prepare me for language use in the academic environment in China.

5. When I write, I find it easier to think in English and then translate into Chinese.

6. In my writing, I focus more on grammar, spelling, and punctuation than on content.

7. I am not confident that I can express my ideas clearly in Chinese.

8. I do not feel confident about paraphrasing someone else's work in Chinese.

9. It does not bother me to write under time constraints.

10. When I write, I am confident in using the academic vocabulary required for my field.

11. I always edit my own writing.

12. I am unsure if I can correctly cite references.

13. If I do not understand a comment in feedback, I ask the lecturer to explain it to me.

14. When I write, I review my previous graded assignments to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

15. I am aware of the Learning Centre at my higher education institution in China.


What difficulties do you encounter in academic writing in Chinese?
........................................
What actions do you take to address these difficulties (check all that apply)?

□ No action

□ I seek help from my lecturer/tutor

□ I seek help from a fellow student

□ I get a native speaker of Chinese to edit my work

□ I ask for an extension of time for my assignment

□ I pay for a private tutor

□ Other (please specify)

.........................................

What do you think instructors could do to help you improve your assignments?

.........................................

Do you have any other thoughts about academic writing?

.........................................

Are you willing to participate in an interview of about 30 minutes?

.........................................

## Appendix 3:

Semi-Structured Interview Guiding Questions

- Can you tell me about yourself? What are you studying in China? Which year are you in? Why did you choose this major?

- Why did you choose to study in China?

- What did you study/work before coming to China?

- Tell me about any challenges you are currently facing in academic writing in Chinese.

- How do you overcome these challenges?

- Do you think these challenges have diminished as you have progressed through your degree? If so, why?

- How do you get help with academic writing in Chinese?

- Have you ever visited a learning center and sought help from a learning advisor for academic writing? Do you know what kind of help they can provide? Are you aware of the cost of using your university's learning center?

- In your current studies, do you receive feedback on your writing? If so, do you find it helpful? Who do you get help from? What kind of help? How frequent is it? On a scale from 1 to 10, how useful is it?

- What aspects do you think the feedback covers in your writing?

- Let's talk about proofreading – before you submit your work to the lecturer, do you have someone proofread your writing (for errors)?

- Who do you think is responsible for helping you improve your academic writing in Chinese?

- What do you think instructors could do to help students with academic writing in Chinese?

- Generally, how would you define (or describe?) academic writing?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about academic writing in Chinese, whether related to your studies before coming here or to your studies here?

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# 英语母语者学术中文写作的挑战及应对：混合研究方法视角下的分析

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**摘要**

随着越来越多的英语学习者融入中国的高等教育体系，如何有效地指导这些学生进行规范的中文学术写作，已经成为学术圈中广泛关注和讨论的议题。尽管已有研究对此问题进行了广泛探讨，但鉴于许多英语学习者正处于跨学科学习阶段，很多方面值得继续研究。本研究采纳了混合方法学（Mixed Methods Research, MMR）的研究范式，通过焦点小组（Focus Groups）、问卷调查（Questionnaires）以及结构化访谈（Structured Interviews）的方式，综合考察了以中文作为第二语言（L2）的学生在学术写作领域的经验与挑战。本项研究旨在深入分析影响学生学术写作能力的多元因素，其中包括学生的先前学习经验、论文指导教师／学校写作辅导中心的指导效果、语言间结构差异，以及汉语水平考试（HSK）的潜在影响等方面。研究结果不仅为理解以英语为母语（L1）的学生在中国学术环境中所面临的具体问题提供了新的视角，同时也为制定针对性的指导方案和教学策略提供了宝贵的洞见，旨在促进这一学生群体的学术写作技能的发展。

**关键词**

专门用途汉语，中文学术写作，难度分析，混合研究方法

闫昊宸，中国传媒大学在读博士研究生，研究方向：国际中文教育、应用语言学研究方法。