

Exploring Students' Experiences with Integrated Writing in the Chinese EFL Classroom: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Integrated writing, which requires writers to synthesize information from source texts, has been adopted in second language (L2) writing pedagogy. However, little is known about how English as a foreign language (EFL) learners engage with classroom-based integrated writing. To better understand how integrated writing can be incorporated into classroom practice, it is important to gather insights from student writers. Using a qualitative design, this study investigates the experiences of Chinese EFL learners engaging in integrated writing in the English writing classroom. It was conducted among 49 first-year undergraduates majoring in English at a Chinese university. Qualitative data were elicited through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. All participants engaged in four integrated writing tasks and submitted written reflective journals in their classrooms over a 15-week semester. Ten participants attended the semi-structured interviews by the end of the research. The findings revealed that students faced multiple challenges in reading and writing and employed various coping strategies. Despite challenges, students identified the perceived learning gains from integrated writing. Students reported that integrated writing helped them learn background knowledge, synthesize supporting evidence, and develop vocabulary and grammatical knowledge for writing argumentative essays. The study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the use of integrated writing as an instructional method for learning to write in EFL pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: integrated writing, learners' perspective, EFL writing pedagogy, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Writing is widely recognized as a non-linear, multi-faceted, and iterative process (Hyland, 2019). For second-language (L2) learner writers, this process is further complicated by language barriers (Kim, Yu, Detrick, & Li, 2024), including unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and difficulties articulating ideas coherently in the target language. These challenges highlight the importance of providing L2 learners with sufficient opportunities to practice writing and develop their language skills in ways that are relevant to their personal learning experiences and needs.

To enhance L2 learners' writing skills, educators should provide more opportunities for writing practice. Independent writing tasks, in which writers compose an essay in response to a brief prompt, are commonly employed for teaching and practice in conventional L2 writing contexts (Kyle, 2020; McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010). L2 writing pedagogy has recently incorporated integrated writing tasks alongside independent writing tasks. Integrated writing requires learners to generate a written text by synthesizing information from one or more source texts for pedagogical purposes (Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). This method not only encourages the development of writing skills but also integrates reading comprehension, critical thinking, and source analysis, all of which are essential for developing learners' academic literacy. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of integrated writing in various L2 educational contexts, with studies showing positive effects on writing proficiency (e.g., Abrams, 2019; Zhang, 2017; Zhou, Chen, & Hou, 2022). However, integrated writing is more often used in language assessments than in classroom instruction, where it has not yet been fully explored as a teaching and practice approach for writing. There is a growing need to investigate how this approach can be implemented effectively in EFL classrooms to support learners' writing development.

To better understand how integrated writing can be incorporated into classroom practice, it is essential to gather insights from learners, the primary participants in these tasks. By focusing on students' voices, this study attempts to provide a learner-centered perspective on integrated writing, recognizing that learners' perceptions, experiences, and preferences are central to shaping effective teaching practices. Some previous research has examined L2 learners' perspectives on source-based integrated writing. For example, Merkel (2020) conducted a case study examining the concerns and experiences of five EFL learners with source-based writing within the context of their course assignments. Evans (2019) employed a retrospective source-integration questionnaire and interviews to explore learners' perceptions of source use in an integrated writing task within the context of learning French as a second language. However, these studies tend to focus on learners' perspectives on their use of source texts. To date, little attention has been paid to EFL learners' engagement with

the whole integrated writing process. Using a qualitative design, this research aims to provide insights into how such tasks can be better aligned with learners’ needs, enhance their learning experiences, and foster greater engagement with the writing process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 L2 Integrated Writing Process

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing emphasis on integrated writing, which originated in the field of writing assessment. Integrated writing tasks provide an alternative approach to writing assessment that considers the role of other language skills (e.g., reading and listening) in the writing process (Gebriel, 2018).

Several studies have compared the integrated writing process with the writing process for independent writing tasks. Plakans (2008) proposed a model of the composing process for reading-to-write tasks (see Figure 1) and compared test-takers’ processes in the reading-to-write and writing-only tasks. The model comprises two stages: preparation for writing and writing. The first stage is linear, with writers preparing for writing in a step-by-step manner, whereas the second stage is circular and overlapping. Ten EFL learners from a university in the United States participated in her research. Differences were observed between integrated and independent writing processes, with the results indicating that the reading-to-write task elicited a more interactive experience for some writers. A mixed-methods study by Miche et al. (2020) used verbal protocols, eye tracking, and keystroke logging to investigate differences in the cognitive processes and writing behaviors of L2 writers engaged in independent and integrated writing tasks. The results indicated that the primary difference was in writers’ use of sources during integrated writing. The study also revealed that students utilized more dynamic and diverse writing behaviors and cognitive processes in the integrated task. Together, integrated writing processes are a typical feature that distinguishes this type of task from independent writing tasks. Researchers argue that completing an integrated task is more interactive, authentic, and well-received by EFL learners because it is more closely aligned with academic writing (Cumming, 2014; Plakans, 2008).

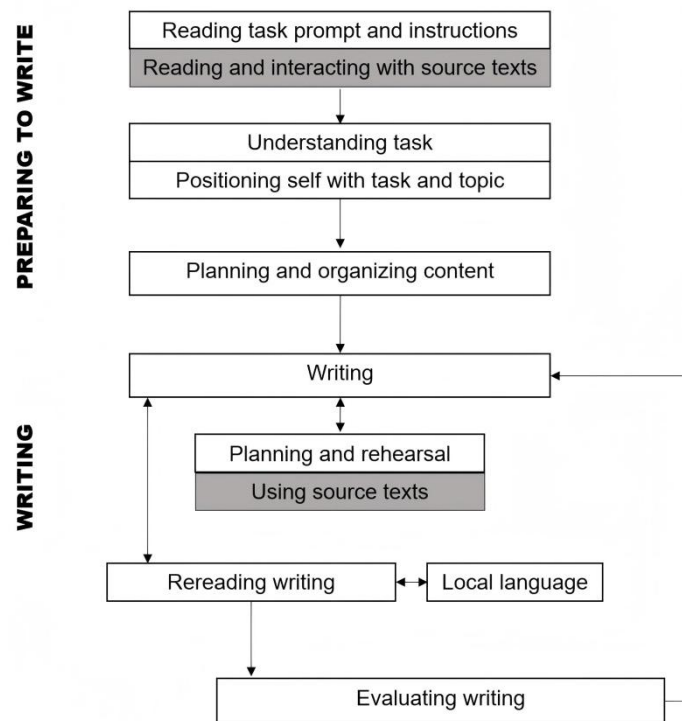


Figure 1. A model of composing process for reading-to-write tasks (Plakans, 2008)

During the integrated writing process, L2 learners employed multiple strategies. Constructing integrated writing is more sophisticated than writing without sources because it integrates multiple language skills, including reading, listening, and writing (Plakans, 2010). L2 learners’ strategy use in integrated writing may be different from strategy use in the writing-only process. As such, there is growing research interest in strategies that learner writers use to meet the requirements of integrated writing tasks. For instance, in the first-language (L1) writing context, from a constructivist perspective, Spivey (1990, 1997) argued that writing from source materials involved three major discourse synthesis procedures: organizing, selecting, and connecting.

Inspired by Spivey (1990, 1997), Yang and Plakans (2012) later explored L2 student writers’ strategy use in an integrated reading-listening-writing task using a structural equation modeling approach. They first developed a 34-item strategy inventory for integrated writing to capture test-takers’ cognitive and behavioral activities across specific stages (before, during, and after writing) of an integrated task. After collecting learners’ strategy and product data, a structural equation modeling approach was used to examine the

association between strategy use and writing performance. The results of the strategy inventory analysis indicated that the strategies L2 learners adopted during the integrated writing process were multifaceted, comprising three facets: self-regulatory strategy use, discourse synthesis strategy use, and test-wiseness strategy use. Specifically, monitoring was included in self-regulatory strategy use; discourse synthesis strategies consisted of organizing and selecting; and test-wiseness strategy use referred to copying, using memorized writing models, and patchwriting previously. The results suggested that the integrated task required the capacity to regulate interactions among reading, listening, and writing, in addition to comprehension and production skills.

Drawing on Yang and Plakans' (2012) research, Cheong, Zhu, Li, and Wen (2019) employed the strategy inventory for integrated writing (Yang & Plakans, 2012) to investigate the impact of intertextual processing on integrated writing. This study focused on the use of discourse synthesis strategies. The results revealed that the discourse synthesis strategy had a significantly positive effect on the participants' integrated writing. The study suggested that writers should be aware of the importance of the strategies they use to organize, select, and synthesize information from sources, a suggestion similar to those in Yang and Plakans' (2012) research.

More recently, research on reading-into-writing has moved beyond cataloguing strategy types to examining the strategic processing underlying source use. Drawing on think-aloud and screen-capture data from 14 German university students, Delgado-Osorio, Koval, Hartig, and Harsch (2023) demonstrate that integrated argumentative writing tasks predominantly elicit higher-level global reading processes (e.g., expeditious global reading), while summary tasks in particular trigger more frequent careful local processing and comprehension-monitoring strategies than argumentative tasks. This process-oriented evidence refines earlier inventory-based findings by illustrating how strategic behavior varies with genre demands.

2.2 L2 Writers' Perceptions of Source Use

One way to assess the efficacy of implementing integrated writing is to gather L2 writers' perspectives on this task type. Regarding L2 integrated writing, several studies have focused on learners' perceptions of source-text use. On the one hand, learners perceive source texts as useful resources for their writing. In her doctoral research, Evans (2019) used a retrospective source-integration questionnaire and interviews to investigate learners' perceptions of source use in an integrated task within an L2 French writing context. The data collection questions addressed three areas: the writing process, source texts, and learners' comments. The results showed that participants tended to acknowledge and transform language knowledge from the sources. In addition, most learners preferred to compose essays from integrated writing tasks and treated the source materials as valuable resources for their language, content, and rhetorical patterns. Similarly, Nguyen (2022), in a mixed-methods study of 103 Vietnamese gifted high school students, reported that learners held highly positive perceptions of integrating reading and writing, particularly in terms of vocabulary development, idea generation, organizational awareness, and communicative achievement. Questionnaire and interview data indicated that students viewed reading texts as models that enriched content knowledge, provided lexical and grammatical resources, and facilitated more coherent and confident writing. On the other hand, some learners express concern over issues arising from the misuse of source information, such as plagiarism. For example, a case study by Merkel (2020) examined the concerns and experiences of five EFL undergraduates with source-based writing in the context of course assignments. To represent a broader range of participants' experiences with source-based writing, the researcher conducted both focus group and one-on-one semi-structured interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. The researcher found that students struggled with plagiarism to some extent. The findings revealed that participants became disoriented while working on their tasks due to mitigating factors, such as the assignment guidelines' context.

Regarding source-based academic writing, Hu and Lei (2016) investigated both L2 students' and teachers' perceptions of source use concerning unacknowledged copying and unattributed paraphrasing. They found a correlation between academic writing experience and the ability to identify instances of plagiarism in texts. Participants' identification of unacknowledged copying overlapped more than their understanding of unattributed paraphrasing, and they took harsher positions on the former. Similarly, Neumann, Leu, and McDonough (2019) qualitatively explored L2 student writers' perceptions of the challenges of using sources in source-based writing. The data were collected through interviews with five English academic writing teachers and 35 students. The findings revealed that the students encountered multiple difficulties at both the reading and writing stages. In particular, students faced challenges understanding the source texts, identifying their main points, appropriately selecting and using source information, and paraphrasing the selected information in their own written texts.

Taken together, prior research employed multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, questionnaires, and written reflections, to elicit L2 student writers' perceptions and experiences of composing essays for integrated writing tasks. However, much of the existing research has focused on learners' views of the use of source texts. L2 learners often feel uncertain about how to incorporate source texts appropriately into their writing. While many students recognize the value of source texts as resources, some remain concerned about using them appropriately, particularly regarding issues such as plagiarism and patchwriting.

The present study seeks to extend existing research by examining learners' experiences with integrated writing in EFL writing classes. Specifically, it aims to explore how learners engage with and perceive integrated writing tasks within their classroom practice. The study addresses the following research question:

How do Chinese EFL learners experience integrated writing in the classroom?

3. Methods

3.1 Research Setting

This study adopts a qualitative design to investigate EFL learners' experiences of engaging in integrated writing in a naturalistic classroom setting. Qualitative methods were selected to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. The research was conducted as part of a compulsory English writing course at a university in China, which spanned one semester. Integrated writing was implemented as a pedagogical approach to enhance students' argumentative writing skills in EFL writing classes.

3.2 Participants

A purposive sample of 49 first-year English major undergraduates participated in this qualitative study. Purposive sampling (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Razavieh, 2010) was adopted to recruit English major first-year students who 1) had no prior exposure to L2 integrated writing and 2) were required to take the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM-4) in their second academic year. This sample was designed to concentrate on students with minimal prior experience in integrated writing, thereby ensuring that the study could document their direct experiences. Based on the personal background survey, all participants were L1 Chinese speakers and had no experience studying or living overseas.

Once we obtained consent from participants, we randomly assigned them to two groups: a digital-source-based integrated writing group (DIWG, $n = 24$) and a print-source-based integrated writing group (PIWG, $n = 25$). In addition, a smaller sample of 10 students (i.e., five from each group) was recruited for semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were randomly selected from students who indicated their willingness to be interviewed. Table 1 illustrates the demographic information for the interviewees.

Table 1. Demographic information of the interviewees

Group	Name	Gender	Age	L1	Years of learning English	English proficiency
DIWG	Lin	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Zhao	Male	17	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Yan	Female	20	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Pan	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Yue	Female	18	Chinese	10	Intermediate
PIWG	Jiao	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Dan	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Xuan	Male	19	Chinese	11	Intermediate
	Xin	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate
	Han	Female	18	Chinese	9	Intermediate

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Integrated Writing Tasks

Four integrated writing tasks were developed for this study. Each task incorporated a source text selected from the *China Daily* application. The *China Daily* was used because it is a reputable, prominent national English-language newspaper, widely cited as one of the most frequently cited Chinese media outlets globally. The source texts were chosen for their appropriateness to the participants' reading levels and their relevance to themes familiar to them. The selected topics for the integrated writing tasks were: (1) education tourism, (2) overseas study, (3) after-school tutoring, and (4) AI chatbots in education. These topics were selected because they are not only pertinent to students' everyday experiences but also relevant to contemporary societal discussions in China. Additionally, the readability and comparability of the texts were assessed. All texts corresponded to the sampled students' reading level in terms of length and readability.

To accomplish an integrated writing task, participants were required to read and comprehend a digital or print source text, take a stance on the subject, organize their arguments, and compose an essay. In their essays, participants were expected to incorporate both information from the source text and their prior knowledge or experiences.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit students' experiences of participating in integrated writing. The interview was used because it is a widely employed qualitative data collection method for providing insights into participants' beliefs, motivations, perceptions, and experiences (Richards, 2009). The semi-structured interview, the most widely used interview format, requires the interviewer to possess a strong understanding of the necessary topics while remaining open to exploring unforeseen areas of discussion.

To gather retrospective data from students, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted after participants completed all integrated writing tasks. The interviews were conducted using an interview protocol. The interview protocol, inspired by Neumann et al. (2019) and Evans (2019), included 13 guided questions focusing on students' experiences with integrated writing. Follow-up questions were asked to further explore the research objectives. To ensure clear communication, all interviews were conducted in Chinese, the participants' L1. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English with the participants' consent.

3.3.3 Reflective Journals

In addition to interviews, written reflective journals were used to gather students' integrated writing experiences over time. Students'

written reflections served as qualitative data to complement and triangulate the interview data. A reflective journal or diary is an introspective method that is effective for gathering written information on the perspectives of a larger number of subjects (McKay, 2009). The non-intrusive nature of a reflective journal as a qualitative data collection instrument is one of its advantages. Reflective journal writing appears to be more convenient for some students because it does not require face-to-face interactions with the researcher or responses to oral inquiries.

In this study, all participants were required to submit a reflective journal after completing each integrated writing task. To guide their reflections, participants were provided with a set of structured questions focusing on their experiences during the integrated writing process. To obtain complete and accurate data, the journals were written in their L1 Chinese and then translated into English. The use of both journals and interviews enabled triangulation, enhancing the richness and validity of the data.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure consisted of two phases throughout one semester. Before data collection, the researchers presented the study information, including research objectives, methods, and procedures, and solicited student participation. Data collection commenced after obtaining consent from all participants. In the first phase, written reflective journals were collected after participants completed all integrated writing tasks in the classroom. In the writing classes, all participants were instructed to read a source text and write an essay in English, arguing for or against the subject, within 60 minutes. After completing each task, they were given 15 minutes to write reflective journals addressing the guiding questions. In the second phase, the ten selected participants underwent one-on-one semi-structured interviews after completing all writing tasks. These interviews, lasting approximately 25 minutes each, explored their experiences with integrated writing. Sample interview questions included: "How did you approach the digital/print source texts in the classroom?" "In what ways have the source texts helped you write argumentative essays?" "How did you feel when you were writing integrated argumentative essays?", and "What factors do you think may influence your essay writing when engaging in integrated writing tasks?" Each interview was audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data from interviews and reflective journals were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting emergent patterns (or themes) within data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach to thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was adopted in this study to categorize and code the emergent themes from the interview and journal data. This inductive approach enabled the identification of themes that addressed the research questions while maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the analysis process.

The data analysis process involved several steps. First, all the recorded interviews and reflective journals were transcribed and translated into English. The transcripts were separately typed into Microsoft Word documents for further analysis. Subsequently, the transcripts were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke (2006). All transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Using NVivo 12, meaningful data fragments were systematically coded. Codes were grouped into initial themes based on recurring patterns and refined through iterative discussions to ensure coherence with the data sets. Themes in students' experiences of integrated writing were identified and labeled to capture their core meanings, supported by illustrative quotations.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process, intercoder reliability was assessed. Two coders, Coder A (one of the researchers) and Coder B (a senior lecturer in English writing), were invited to conduct thematic analysis. Several steps were taken to achieve intercoder reliability. Before analyzing the data, Coder A and Coder B were trained and informed about the objectives. Initially, to reach an internal consensus, the coders proofread the transcripts of interviews and reflective journals. Secondly, they worked individually to categorize and code the transcripts. Then, intercoder agreement tests were conducted to determine the reliability of the interview and reflective journal coding. The intercoder agreement was assessed using percentage agreement, yielding 82%. This high level of agreement reveals the reliability of the coding process. Discrepancies (18% of data) were reviewed collaboratively, and consensus was reached through discussion. Additionally, to enhance external trustworthiness, participants were invited to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy, and an expert in qualitative research was consulted to assess the validity of the analysis.

4. Findings

To address the research question, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to qualitatively code and categorize common themes in students' integrated writing experiences, based on interview and reflective journal data. The findings are presented collectively, as similar themes emerged across both data sources.

Two major themes were identified: (1) perceived challenges in integrated writing and (2) perceived learning gains from integrated writing. The first theme focuses specifically on the obstacles encountered during task performance and the strategies used to address them. The second theme explores the skills and knowledge students gained through integrated writing.

4.1 Perceived Challenges

The first theme, namely, students' perceived challenges, captures the difficulties students encountered when engaging in integrated writing tasks. Students reported multiple difficulties at both the reading and writing stages. Meanwhile, they adopted reading and writing strategies to cope with the difficulties.

The first sub-theme concerns the challenges they experienced during source-text reading comprehension. Most students reported struggling with reading and fully understanding the source texts due to unfamiliar vocabulary, syntactically complex sentence structures, and challenges associated with digital reading. Table 2 displays an overview of these challenges.

Table 2. Interviewees’ perceived challenges in source-text comprehension

Stage	Codes	Frequency of codes	Illustrative examples
Reading	Lexical processing constraints	7	I could understand them, but certain new or unfamiliar words were challenging to read.
	Syntactic parsing difficulties	3	Without a translation tool, I found it difficult to comprehend the long sentences. I do not know what the authors want to mean in such sentences or paragraphs.
	Challenges in digital reading	3	I find it difficult to read and understand digital texts. I do not like staring at screens for too long.

Note. Examples are extracted from the interviews.

More than half of the interviewees reported difficulty comprehending unfamiliar vocabulary in source texts. In their reflective journals, students also reported vocabulary-related comprehension difficulties. Two quotations extracted from the interviews illustrated these obstacles:

- (1) Without a translation tool, the text was challenging for me due to unfamiliar vocabulary and the difficulty of translation. I could only grasp the general idea from the first reading, but some technical terms were hard to understand. (Interview with Jiao)
- (2) They (the source texts) were somewhat challenging because of the new vocabulary and the difficulty of translation. The new words made them harder to understand. (Interview with Yan)

Beyond lexical challenges, several students also struggled with understanding complex sentence structures, which further hindered their reading comprehension. Despite recognizing individual words, they struggled to comprehend entire sentences, often due to limited proficiency in English grammar. For example, the following excerpt shows an interviewee’s comments:

Understanding long and complex sentences in the articles was difficult for me. I understood each word individually, but when I tried to comprehend the entire sentence, there may have been inaccuracies. (Interview with Han)

Additionally, several students from the DIWG highlighted challenges with digital reading that affected their ability to annotate and retain information. For example, an interviewee, Lin, commented, “Digital texts were less convenient to read and comprehend. It was rather difficult for me to understand such digital texts. I could only comprehend a few ideas, not the entire text.” One response in the first journal said, “It was hard to take notes on digital texts, which might prevent me from reading comprehension.”

The second sub-theme captures the challenges students encountered at the writing stage. Table 3 presents a summary of codes concerning interviewees’ perceived challenges during essay writing.

Table 3. Interviewees’ perceived challenges in essay writing

Stage	Codes	Frequency of codes	Illustrative examples
Writing	Selecting useful information	4	I read and tried to comprehend the texts as much as possible. However, it was quite difficult to select and use useful points from the text in my essays.
	Paraphrasing	3	Paraphrase? Not often...I did not know how to express the information selected from the texts in my own words.
	Linguistic encoding constraints	10	1) Vocabulary was also a challenge for me. Sometimes the words we learned in class and from the readings are still difficult for me to use correctly in my writing. 2) I think the difficulty was organizing the English language in my writing. It was difficult to express my arguments in accurate and advanced language.

Note. Examples are extracted from the interviews.

First, students acknowledged their difficulties with integrating source information. Most students experienced difficulty selecting and integrating appropriate information from the source texts into their writing, despite understanding the texts. For instance, an interviewee was concerned about whether the information she selected from the text would help organize her argumentation. Furthermore, several interviewees indicated weaknesses in paraphrasing and in citing sources. They were unable to cite the selected source information in their own words. The quotes below illustrate students’ struggles with integrating appropriate source information into their writing:

- (1) It was quite hard. I had to first understand the texts and identify which points could be used in my essays. Selecting useful points from the texts was difficult. I was unsure whether I had used the correct information in my essay. (Interview with Lin)
- (2) It was difficult for me to transfer the information from the texts into my own words. Sometimes I could only copy the

sentences verbatim due to time constraints and limited practice. (Interview with Xin)

Students also experienced constraints on linguistic encoding in their writing. Half of the interviewees reported that limited vocabulary prevented them from using their own words when writing essays. For example, an interviewee, Han, responded: “I think it [the difficulty] was vocabulary. I had ideas for supporting my stance in my mind, but could not express them due to my limited vocabulary.” In addition, some students reported difficulties producing grammatically correct sentences. An interviewee’s comment is shown in the excerpt below:

It was not easy. Expressing my own ideas was still a challenge. My writing often consists of short, simple sentences, making it difficult to write an essay. I was not sure whether I used the correct words or grammar. (Interview with Han)

The third sub-theme captures students’ strategies for coping with these challenges during the integrated writing process. Table 4 presents the strategies students employed during integrated writing.

Table 4. Interviewees’ strategies used in the integrated writing process

Stages	Codes	Frequency of codes	Illustrative examples
First reading	Skimming	10	First, I read quickly and tried to understand the texts as thoroughly as possible.
	Lexical inferencing	7	When I encountered new words, I usually first guessed their meanings.
Re-reading	Highlighting key points	5	I liked highlighting the main points and annotating the text directly, which helped me read and understand the text.
	Looking up new words	6	If I still did not understand (the new words), I looked them up on a second read.
	Taking notes	4	I wrote down the keywords of the texts in my notebook, trying to memorize them.
Writing	Planning	4	I considered the main points, key terms, and sentences, and tried to list them before writing them.
	Discourse synthesis	4	I used the author’s opinions to support my argument.
	Revision	3	I checked if I selected appropriate examples to support my stance. I also changed some words and sentences.

Note. Examples are extracted from the interviews.

Students used skimming and lexical inferencing during the initial reading. All interviewees reported skimming the entire article when reading a source text for the first time. Students read the source texts rapidly and without interruption, attempting to identify the main ideas and general textual structures. Furthermore, multiple students employed a lexical inferencing strategy while reading the texts. They attempted to infer the meanings of unfamiliar phrases from the texts’ contextual cues. For illustration, the quote is derived from the interview with Yan, “I first read the texts very fast...When I found unfamiliar words, I did not look them up immediately. I relied on context to infer the meanings of the words, then looked them up if necessary.”

To better comprehend the source texts, students employed additional strategies during rereading. Several students identified and highlighted key points, then took notes. These strategies helped them select and record relevant source information. Nevertheless, as noted above, some students from the DIWG argued that digital reading was inconvenient for highlighting key information. Some students noted that they compensated for this limitation by taking screenshots or writing notes in separate notebooks. Moreover, a few students focused on understanding unfamiliar words. They looked up new words in a dictionary and recorded them. The quote regarding students’ rereading strategies is shown as follows:

I usually read the text first, then highlight useful words and sentences with markers and look up difficult words in my second, more detailed reading. I noted them down for further reference. (Interview with Dan)

Further, students also employed writing strategies to compose essays. The findings revealed that students’ writing strategies primarily involved planning, discourse synthesis, and reviewing and revising. First, some students developed writing plans as they prepared to write. They reread the source texts and writing prompts, recorded keywords, predicted essay content, and outlined key points. For instance, one interviewee, Yue, responded, “When I found the writing topic was difficult for me, I read the [source] text again to get more familiar with it, found out and listed useful words and ideas, and outlined the main points that I wanted to write.” Second, some students used discourse synthesis strategies to connect source information with their arguments. They identified and summarized key ideas from the source texts, then paraphrased and integrated this information into their own writing. For example, one student from the DIWG reflected on the writing process in his first journal: “I thought the expert’s statement could support my position, so I used my words to cite his ideas in my essay.” Additionally, three interviewees reported reviewing their essays and making minor revisions, whereas the others did not because of time constraints. For example, one interviewee, Dan, stated, “Once I finished my writing, I reread my essay to check whether I had made any mistakes, then I made some small changes.”

4.2 Perceived Learning Gains

The second theme focuses on the skills and knowledge that students gained from integrated writing, which they perceived as beneficial. Although they encountered various challenges, students benefited from integrated writing. Specifically, they reported that the source texts integrated into the writing tasks provided background knowledge and supporting evidence, enhanced their language skills for

argumentative writing, and contributed somewhat to the development of reading and listening skills. Hence, students expressed a strong willingness to engage in integrated writing in the future. Table 5 summarizes the key benefits identified.

Table 5. Interviewees' perceived learning gains from integrated writing

Codes	Frequency of codes	Illustrative examples
Background knowledge	9	The provided reading texts provided background knowledge and helped us better understand the topics.
Supporting evidence	8	These readings provided useful data and perspectives that supported my viewpoints.
Lexical enrichment	8	The articles mainly helped me with vocabulary. I think I learned more technical words from those articles.
Syntactic development	5	Such articles and writing practice particularly helped me understand and construct grammatically correct sentences.
Reading and listening skills	4	1) I think such integrated tasks are good for improving my reading and writing skills. 2) The audio materials helped me comprehend the texts and practice my listening skills.
Willingness to engage in integrated writing	10	I prefer to read some materials before writing because combining reading and writing helps me expand my vocabulary and develop multiple language skills.

Note. Examples are extracted from the interviews.

The first sub-theme relates to the background knowledge drawn from source materials and reflects the most frequently expressed view of students' perceived learning gains. When discussing the challenges of argumentative writing, most interviewees reported difficulty constructing effective arguments due to insufficient background knowledge. In contrast, during integrated writing tasks, students found that the source texts offered valuable contextual information and real-world perspectives, which supported idea generation and strengthened the development of their arguments. Two interview excerpts are illustrated as follows:

(1) The reading articles provided background knowledge and helped us understand the topic better. If I were not familiar with the writing topic or lacked background information, I do not think I could write a good essay. (Interview with Yan)

(2) I find it interesting to participate in such reading-to-write tasks. The provided texts provided background information on the topics and introduced ideas beyond English, enabling us to deepen our knowledge and broaden our understanding of the world. (Interview with Xuan)

Notably, some DIWG students indicated that the images, videos, or audio in the digital texts were effective. For example, an interviewee, Yan, commented, "Other than the reading texts, the pictures and videos showed a more direct image of the background information and context, helping me have a better understanding."

Moreover, students acknowledged that the source texts provided valuable evidence. They found that the data, facts, expert opinions, and examples in the texts helped them construct stronger arguments. Both interview and reflective journal data revealed that most students extracted and synthesized specific evidence from the texts to substantiate their claims. The quotes regarding students' integration of supporting evidence from the sources are shown in the following excerpts:

(1) The reading texts included quotes from experts and examples that I could cite to support my viewpoints, which made my arguments more effective. Such texts really helped me develop arguments. (Interview with Han)

(2) Those reading materials provided me with useful data and viewpoints, which gave me some logical support. I extracted and used some of them as supporting evidence for my arguments in my essays. (Interview with Lin)

Furthermore, students reported that integrated writing contributed to their lexical enrichment and syntactic development. The students perceived Source texts integrated into the writing tasks as effective language inputs for learning to write. First, most students acknowledged that they not only adopted useful words, such as technical terms and cohesive devices, in their writing, but also learned new words from the input texts. For example, Dan expressed in the interview:

Particularly, vocabulary...My vocabulary improved through participating in integrated reading and writing practice. I learned many new words from the reading texts, especially more advanced phrases or expressions. The words I used most frequently in high school were relatively basic.

Second, students found that reading well-structured source texts helped them construct more complex and grammatically accurate sentences. Teacher-led sentence analysis was particularly useful in improving their understanding of complex structures. For example, an interviewee, Zhao, commented:

In addition to vocabulary, the articles also provided good examples of long and complex sentence structures. With our teacher's instruction, I learned some language. I used some of them to write my own sentences.

Nonetheless, a small number of students contended that their improvement in syntactic structure paled in comparison to their lexical progress. Two interviewees commented that, for example, while the source texts helped with word choice, they had limited impact on

sentence complexity.

Additionally, several students claimed that integrated reading-to-write tasks facilitated their reading and listening skills. One student from the PIWG, Xin, reported in the interview, “Through those reading-to-write tasks, I had a chance to attend extra reading activities that helped me improve my reading skills.” A few students in the DIWG also noted that the embedded audio and video resources in the digital texts helped them comprehend the texts and improve their listening skills. For instance, an interviewee, Zhao, said, “There were times when I might miss some important details visually, but I could catch them through listening to the audio. Thus, it was also beneficial for improving my English listening.”

Consequently, all interviewees expressed an interest in continuing integrated writing in their future EFL classes. They emphasized its benefits for reading and writing proficiency, vocabulary expansion, and the acquisition of grammatical knowledge, as well as for motivating them to engage in writing practice. Xuan shared his viewpoint in the interview: “I would like to participate in this type of writing practice. It significantly improved my English proficiency and reduced my reliance on exam-writing templates. It also enhanced my reading comprehension.” In addition, data from students’ final reflective journals confirmed that most participants found integrated writing to be an engaging and effective learning-to-write experience.

In brief, students encountered multiple challenges at both the reading and writing stages, particularly in comprehending unfamiliar vocabulary, managing sentence complexity, and integrating sources. Meanwhile, they employed various strategies to mitigate these difficulties, including skimming, lexical inference, note-taking, discourse synthesis, and revision. On the other hand, students perceived integrated writing as highly beneficial for their writing development. They valued the integration of reading and writing, recognizing its role in their writing proficiency and learning English.

5. Discussion

The study offers insights into the experiences of Chinese EFL students engaging in classroom-based integrated writing. Two major themes emerged from the interview and journal data: perceived challenges and perceived learning gains.

The findings revealed that students faced multiple challenges in integrated writing, including difficulties with reading source texts and writing essays. To cope with the challenges, they adopted several reading and writing strategies.

First, students reported challenges with reading and comprehension of the source text. For example, some interviewees reported, “...certain new or unfamiliar words were challenging to read.” “Understanding long and complex sentences in the articles was difficult for me.” This finding aligns with prior studies on student writers’ perspectives on source text use (Evans, 2019; Merkel, 2020; Neumann et al., 2019), which indicate that student writers often struggle to interpret textual information. Comprehension difficulties in this study primarily stemmed from unfamiliar vocabulary, specialized terms, and complex sentence structures. Despite preliminary readability assessments confirming that texts matched learners’ proficiency levels, some complexity was intentionally maintained to encourage deeper engagement and motivation (Sung, Lin, Dyson, Chang, & Chen, 2015). Moreover, some students reported concerns about reading digital texts, consistent with Chou’s (2012) findings that EFL students prefer printed materials because digital texts may limit their use of strategies such as highlighting and note-taking. The preference for printed texts may reflect concerns about missing information and physical discomfort associated with prolonged screen reading.

During the essay-writing phase, students encountered challenges in processing source material and effectively integrating it into their essays. Consistent with prior research (Evans, 2019; Merkel, 2020; Neumann et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2022), students struggled to identify relevant information from source texts and integrate it appropriately into their arguments. For example, one argued, “It was difficult for me to transfer the information from the texts into my own words.” Similar to Neumann et al.’s (2019) findings, students in this study tended to rely excessively on source texts, including at times copying original sentences, due to limited paraphrasing skills. As first-year undergraduates with minimal exposure to paraphrasing instruction and practice, they found it challenging to synthesize and restructure source material. In addition to source information processing, most students also reported difficulties with vocabulary and sentence structure, which significantly impacted their ability to construct persuasive arguments. This aligns with earlier studies (Mazgutova, 2015; Yang & Sun, 2012), which highlight the language-specific nature of argumentative writing and the linguistic challenges that novice L2 writers encounter. The participants’ limited lexical knowledge and grammatical competence might hinder their writing performance.

To address challenges, students employed various strategies during both the reading and writing processes. At the initial reading stage, students used skimming and contextual inference to grasp the main ideas quickly. Subsequently, they employed bottom-up strategies, such as highlighting key points, note-taking, and dictionary use, to deepen comprehension during the rereading phase. These findings partially correspond to previous research on reading strategies in integrated tasks (Delgado-Osorio et al., 2023; Plakans & Gebiril, 2012; Yang & Plakans, 2012). However, fewer strategies were identified in this study compared to others (e.g., Delgado-Osorio et al., 2023; Plakans, 2009), potentially due to differences in research focus and methodological approaches (interviews versus think-aloud protocols). It may also reflect limited strategic repertoires among participants. Furthermore, the writing strategies employed by students included planning, discourse synthesis, and revision. Planning helped students clarify arguments and monitor their writing processes. Although participants acknowledged challenges with citation practices, a few demonstrated awareness and attempted to paraphrase appropriately. These discourse synthesis strategies are consistent with findings from previous studies (Cheong et al., 2019; Delgado-Osorio et al., 2023; Plakans & Gebiril, 2012). However, the study’s limited explicit instruction in discourse synthesis likely contributed to the fewer observed

strategies. Revision practices were constrained by time, with only a minority actively reviewing their work. Time pressure may partly explain this pattern, but it also points to insufficient training in time management and recursive writing processes.

Despite challenges, students identified multiple learning gains from integrated writing. They perceived the source texts integrated in the writing tasks as valuable inputs of background knowledge, supporting evidence, and linguistic resources that facilitated their writing performance.

First, most students reported acquiring contextual background knowledge through source texts incorporated in the writing tasks. In addition, they adapted data, facts, expert opinions, and examples from the input sources to support their arguments. For instance, students reported, “These readings provided useful data and perspectives that supported my viewpoints.” “The reading materials provided useful data and viewpoints that offered logical support.” The findings are in line with Gebril’s (2018, p. 4) statement that “they [integrated writing tasks] provide background knowledge for writers while working on a specific topic.” Reading the source texts provided students with relevant background knowledge (Abrams, 2019; Plakans, Liao, & Wang, 2019; Plakans & Gebril, 2013) and content support (Zhang, 2017). Students not only familiarized themselves with the writing topics but also gained proficiency in integrating appropriate source information to support their claims through repeated integrated reading and writing practice. These suggest that repeated integrated writing improved the content quality of students’ argumentative writing.

Furthermore, students demonstrated improved writing performance in vocabulary use and sentence structure when engaging in integrated writing. The source texts provided essential linguistic input, enabling students to incorporate new vocabulary, phrases, and syntactic structures into their writing. Qualitative findings indicate incremental improvements in lexical and grammatical dimensions across integrated tasks, confirming the importance of reading as a source of linguistic input (Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Plakans et al., 2019). Frequent engagement with vocabulary and sentence structures enhanced students’ linguistic competence, consistent with prior research (Abrams, 2019; Payant, McDonough, Uludag, & Lindberg, 2019; Plakans & Gebril, 2013). As noted, most students employed bottom-up reading strategies, focusing on word- and sentence-level comprehension, during the rereading phase. This confirms the significant role that words and language use, as fundamental components of written language, play in reading and writing (Plakans et al., 2019). When engaging in integrated writing practices, students selected, connected, and adapted words from source texts to integrate into their own writing. The likelihood that learners will use certain words in their writing increases with their frequent use (Zhang, 2017).

Most participants expressed enthusiasm for ongoing involvement with classroom-based integrated writing, citing the multifaceted benefits they had observed. They indicated a willingness to incorporate integrated writing tasks into their future English writing classes to cultivate their integrated reading and writing skills, motivate them to engage with reading and writing practice, and assist them in acquiring vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study investigated Chinese EFL learners’ experiences with integrated writing tasks in the classroom context. An inductive thematic analysis of the data yielded two interrelated themes that capture their experiential engagement with integrated writing, namely perceived challenges and perceived learning gains.

The findings illustrate how students navigate the complexities of integrated writing while balancing these struggles with skill development. Regarding challenges, students reported difficulty processing source material and producing argumentative essays that met the task requirements. Specifically, challenges included understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, decoding lengthy, complex sentences, and engaging effectively with digital texts. To overcome these challenges, participants employed strategies such as lexical inferencing, strategic highlighting, and note-taking. During essay writing, participants expressed concerns over the misuse of source information, lexical and grammatical accuracy, and the logical structuring of arguments. These issues were addressed through strategies such as planning and outlining, discourse synthesis, and thorough revision. Despite challenges, students found integrated writing beneficial for developing their argumentative writing skills. They perceived engagement with source texts as an opportunity to build contextual background knowledge and identify supporting evidence. They also reported improvements in language use, argumentative coherence, and logical reasoning in their writing. Hence, students showed positive attitudes toward integrated writing. They expressed enthusiasm for future tasks, citing potential improvements in writing performance and increased motivation to learn English.

Taken together, the study’s findings have several implications for EFL writing pedagogies. Drawing on students’ perspectives, integrated writing tasks should be considered an effective way to enhance writing skills in EFL classes. Learners’ viewpoints underscore the pedagogical benefits of integrating reading and writing to foster their linguistic and rhetorical skills. Educators should incorporate integrated tasks into EFL syllabi to promote holistic language development. These tasks should be designed to challenge students while providing opportunities to engage critically with texts and to develop their writing skills. To this end, they should consider offering learners extensive, well-written, multimodal reading texts, such as academic articles, editorials, and news from authentic media, as input sources, and explicitly guiding them through the reading and writing processes. The diverse nature of these texts will expose students to a range of writing styles, vocabulary, and rhetorical structures, thereby supporting their development in both reading comprehension and writing.

Furthermore, the challenges students encountered highlight the need for targeted instructional guidance in discourse synthesis, vocabulary expansion, and digital reading strategies to enhance learners’ integrated reading-to-write skills. Integrated reading and writing strategy instruction should be applied in classrooms. As students engage with integrated writing tasks, they must be able to select relevant

information from multiple sources and integrate it into their writing. This process requires a range of skills, including the ability to paraphrase effectively, summarize key points, and organize information logically. Teachers should devote specific instruction time to these skills, demonstrating techniques for selecting pertinent information and integrating it cohesively into an essay. Students should be guided in citing sources appropriately and avoiding the misuse of source material, which was identified as a challenge in the study. Additionally, as some students struggle to engage with digital texts, it is crucial to integrate digital literacy into EFL curricula to equip students with the skills to evaluate online sources and navigate digital materials critically.

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research setting may limit the study's scope. The research was conducted within a single institutional context, focusing on participants from one Chinese university. Moreover, another limitation may be related to the data collection method. The study relied on participants' self-reported data. Future studies could triangulate self-reports with other data sources, such as textual analysis of students' written work, classroom observations, think-aloud protocols, and teacher interviews. Despite its limitations, this study yielded in-depth insights from student writers, enhancing understanding of the use of integrated writing as a pedagogical method for learning writing in EFL classroom practice.

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Authors' contributions

Ms. Zhanwen Song, Prof. Ngee Thai Yap, and Dr. Halis Azhan Mohd Hanafiah were responsible for study design, data collection, data analysis, and revising. Ms. Zhanwen Song was responsible for collecting data and drafting the manuscript. Prof. Ngee Thai Yap and Dr. Halis Azhan Mohd Hanafiah revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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