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Academic English Writing Challenges in a Blended EFL and ESL Learning Environment: Insights from Chinese International High School Students

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Abstract. In the wake of China's educational internationalization policy and the technological shifts post-COVID-19, the mode of educational globalization has undergone significant transformations. In this context, this study investigates the academic English writing challenges of Chinese international high school students (CIHSSs) in a blended English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) learning environment. Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and prior research, the study examines the specific hurdles CIHSSs face in academic writing. Previous research has highlighted various difficulties in academic English writing for international students; however, a significant research gap exists concerning high school students, especially in blended learning context settings. To fill this gap, this qualitative case study explores CIHSSs' English language learning experiences, focusing particularly on their academic writing challenges in a blended EFL and ESL context. Through semi-structured individual interviews with three CIHSSs, the study conducts a thematic analysis to identify key challenges across five areas: cultural differences, unfamiliarity with academic norms, language proficiency limitations, communication barriers, and technological adaptation issues. The findings emphasize the importance of communication, especially peer support and collaborative learning, underlining the need for effective English language learning strategies (ELLSs). These insights are vital for educators and learners to navigate the complexities of blended EFL and ESL learning environments effectively.

Keywords: English learning challenges; academic English writing; international education; blended learning environment

1. Background of the Study

As globalization intensifies, the flow of international students, particularly from China, has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the global education sector.

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The substantial initiatives undertaken to internationalize its education system has resulted in a notable increase in the number of Chinese students pursuing education abroad (Ministry of Education, 2022). UNESCO data reveals that Chinese students constitute the largest group of international students globally (Institute for Statistics, 2023). Recognizing the importance of addressing the challenges faced by these students has become imperative to ensure their academic success and smooth transition into higher education.

Research has highlighted various challenges encountered by Chinese international students, including cultural, psychological, and academic dimensions (Holliman et al., 2022; Parnther, 2022; Zhai Xiuwen 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Despite high standardized test scores, language skills often pose difficulties, particularly in academic literacy areas such as reading and writing (Li & Han, 2023). Additionally, limited comprehension of cultural contexts hinders the adaptation to diverse environments at foreign universities (Chi, 2023; Ching et al., 2017). Reports highlight challenges specific to Chinese undergraduates in the United States, including academic dishonesty and inadequate academic literacy, mainly attributed to language and cognitive barriers (Group, 2022; LLC, 2020, 2021, 2022). This stems from a prevailing examination-focused approach in China's English as a foreign language (EFL) education model, which fails to emphasize aspects such as attendance, academic integrity, and cultural awareness. While enhancing language literacy before entering higher education has proven beneficial, more research is needed at the high school level. Although the number of certified international schools in China is growing, most high schools maintain traditional approaches, with international students being a minority (Insight, 2021). Furthermore, studies addressing the English language learning experiences of these high school students remain limited, highlighting a research gap that needs attention (Liu & Pell, 2019; Mbous et al., 2022; Xu, 2021).

Furthermore, the emergence of COVID-19 has notably transformed the educational landscape, particularly by enhancing student receptivity towards online learning modalities (Nguyen et al., 2021). In this context, some Chinese international high school students have pursued a dual educational approach. Alongside their conventional EFL courses offered in traditional Chinese international schools, they have enrolled in the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) program, delivered online from Canada (Group, 2022). This program includes ESL courses, serving as either a complementary or alternative educational pathway. Despite the virtual mode of instruction, all students, encompassing both Canadian and international enrollees, must meet the requisite standards of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) (Ontario Public Service, 2016). Consequently, Chinese students undertaking their studies within their home country are subjected to analogous academic exigencies as their counterparts physically present in the host nations. While the academic writing challenges faced by international students in English-speaking countries have been extensively explored (Cennetkusu, 2017; Scott et al., 2020), a notable gap in research exists regarding these challenges within the unique context of blended learning. This scenario involves international

students' receiving online ESL instruction from English-speaking countries, while concurrently attending EFL courses in their home country's international schools through traditional in-person formats.

Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to identify and understand the challenges CIHSSs encounter as they strive to develop proficiency in academic English writing. The central inquiry of this study addresses the main question: What are the academic English writing challenges encountered by CIHSSs in the EFL and ESL blended learning environment? Examining these challenges deepens the understanding of CIHSSs' language learning experiences, thereby bolstering their academic development in a blended EFL and ESL context, and concurrently enriching English-medium instructional practices in international high school settings.

2. Literature Review

The subsequent literature review systematically navigates through the theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings pertinent to the study, structuring the discourse into three critical areas. Initially, it elucidates the fundamental theories guiding this research—sociocultural theory (SCT) and Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT)—which highlight the roles of social interaction, cultural context, and experiential learning in academic English writing. The review then transitions to an examination of the challenges inherent in blended learning environments, articulating their impact on both learners and educators. Finally, it delves into the specific obstacles encountered by international students in academic English writing, including language proficiency, reading practices, cultural influences, and motivational aspects. This layered exploration offers a comprehensive backdrop to the study's focus, highlighting the multifaceted nature of learning in a blended context.

2.1 Fundamental Theories

There are two theories underpinning this study, namely SCT and Kolb's ELT. The SCT, developed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development, particularly through the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and mediation with language as a key cultural tool. In addition, ELT, as articulated by Kolb et al. (1984), highlights the significance of experiential engagement in learning. It proposes a cyclical learning process involving experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and experimenting. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how social, cultural, and experiential factors influence the development of academic English writing skills in CIHSSs, aligning closely with the context and objectives of this study.

The SCT, originated by Vygotsky, emphasizes the pivotal role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development. At the heart of SCT lies the ZPD, which captures the distinction between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish under the guidance of a more knowledgeable individual (Vygotsky, 1978). Mediation, a fundamental concept within SCT, posits that cognitive processes are influenced and

enhanced by cultural tools, notably language (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). This aspect of SCT is particularly salient in understanding the intricacies of academic English writing, where language serves as both a medium and a tool for learning (Swain et al., 2015). The blended learning environment in this research provides a unique context for examining how SCT manifests in language acquisition, particularly how interaction and cultural tools within this environment facilitate the learning of academic English. The interactive, culturally-rich settings of blended learning align with SCT's emphasis on learning through social interaction and mediation, offering a nuanced understanding of the cognitive processes involved in mastering academic English writing (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2019).

Kolb's ELT underscores the importance of experience in the learning process, viewing learning as a dynamic interaction between learners and their environment (Kolb, 2014). The ELT emphasizes a cyclical pattern of learning comprising experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and experimenting (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This approach resonates profoundly with the process of acquiring academic English writing skills, where learners benefit from engaging with authentic experiential learning opportunities (Wilson & Beard, 2013). The current study delves into how CIHSSs experience and navigate the academic English writing learning process within a blended learning environment. This environment, characterized by a mix of traditional and digital learning experiences, aligns with ELT's emphasis on experiential learning, providing rich opportunities for students to engage in practical language use, reflect on their experiences, and iteratively develop their writing skills (Morris, 2019). The ELT's focus on integrating diverse experiences and active engagement offers valuable insights into how CIHSSs develop competencies in academic English writing, highlighting the experiential and interactive dimensions of language learning in blended contexts.

2.2 Challenges in Blended Learning Environment

Blended learning, integrating online and offline educational components, has emerged prominently with technological advancements and the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational methodologies. Initially identified as a burgeoning trend in 2003, the evolution of digital tools in education has been substantial, shifting from traditional web-based platforms to the inclusion of mobile technologies and massive open online courses (MOOCs). The transition to blended learning models has transformed the delivery of many courses, including language education, but also introduced a spectrum of challenges impacting learners and instructors alike.

For learners, the transition to blended learning environments necessitates the development of robust time management skills, particularly in allocating time effectively among different learning components (Yao, 2019). This challenge is further compounded by the need to adapt to diverse learning materials which may vary significantly in content and complexity across online and offline settings (Boelens et al., 2018). Additionally, learners are required to navigate technology transitions adeptly, moving seamlessly between digital platforms

and traditional learning tools (Ramalingam et al., 2022). The frequency and quality of interactions also present challenges; learners may experience delays in resolving confusions due to less immediate feedback in online formats compared to traditional classroom settings (Ramalingam et al., 2023).

From the educators' perspective, the blended learning model introduces complexities in student interaction. The absence of continuous face-to-face interaction hinders the ability to foster a fully interactive learning environment, which is crucial in language acquisition (Ramalingam et al., 2022). This limitation is exacerbated by the difficulty in gauging student reactions and dynamically adjusting teaching methods in real time, a cornerstone of effective language pedagogy (Ramalingam et al., 2023). The integration and application of technology in teaching, while beneficial, require educators to acquire and update their digital competencies continuously (Zhang-Wu, 2018). Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching language skills, particularly those requiring active output such as speaking and writing, is often diminished in the absence of direct real-time interaction and feedback (Maulida et al., 2022).

In the context of blended learning, the integration and effective utilization of information technology emerge as pivotal factors influencing student engagement and educational outcomes. The challenge of adapting technology within educational frameworks is not just about accessibility but also about ensuring students possess the requisite digital literacy skills for academic success. This notion is supported by Prensky (2010), who introduced the concept of "digital natives", suggesting that while today's students are inherently familiar with digital technologies, their effective use in academic settings requires specific skills and training. Furthermore, Spiegel (2021) emphasizes the importance of enhancing digital literacy and providing robust technical support to facilitate a more seamless learning experience for students. These perspectives highlight a significant shift towards recognizing the need for tailored technological instruction and support mechanisms within blended learning environments, underscoring the critical role of digital competence in modern educational paradigms.

The exploration of blended learning challenges reveals a nuanced interplay between technological advancement and pedagogical adaptation, marked by the evolution from traditional methods to digital innovations. This transition, while enriching the educational landscape, especially in language education, necessitates a recalibration of learner and educator roles. Learners are tasked with mastering time management and navigating diverse content across platforms, necessitating enhanced digital literacy, while educators face the challenge of maintaining engagement without the immediacy of face-to-face interaction, underscoring the need for continual digital skill enhancement. The literature emphasizes a pivotal shift towards addressing these challenges through tailored instructional strategies and support, highlighting the integral role of digital competence in contemporary education. Addressing these issues is not only imperative for enhancing the overall learning experience but also

critical for developing effective academic English writing skills, as explored in the subsequent section.

2.3 Challenges in English Academic Writing for International Students

Academic writing is a complex and cognitive activity that demands careful thought, discipline, and concentration, often seen as the product of one's thought process (Zhang & Zhan, 2020). However, for international students, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the challenge of academic writing in English is particularly pronounced (Karakoç & Köse, 2017). This complexity is further compounded by the fact that writing is not merely an individual endeavour but a communal one as it necessitates an understanding of the expectations and conventions within a specific academic community (Scott et al., 2020). As such, international students face multifaceted difficulties in mastering academic writing in a foreign language context.

One major challenge in academic writing for international students stems from their language proficiency. Proficiency in grammar and vocabulary is crucial, as spelling errors and limited vocabulary can significantly impede the writing process (Asaad & Shabdin, 2021). Grammatical accuracy, encompassing subject-verb agreement, tense usage, pronoun reference, and sentence structure, plays a pivotal role in conveying the intended meaning and ensuring readability (Akbar, 2017). Language proficiency thus forms the foundation upon which effective academic writing is built; shortcomings in this area can lead to reader confusion and frustration.

Another significant challenge is the lack of extensive reading, which is integral to developing language awareness and writing skills (Sang, 2017). Reading exposes students to diverse language structures, styles, and genres, providing them with models for effective writing. Without extensive reading, students may struggle to construct coherent sentences and paragraphs, resorting to a copy-and-paste approach rather than synthesizing and summarizing information from various sources (Gu, 2017). The absence of this critical input impedes their ability to engage effectively in the writing process.

Additionally, cultural factors, including mindset and educational background, contribute to the writing challenges faced by international students. Students from teacher-centred educational systems, such as in China, may have limited experience in critical thinking and analytical skills development (Tang et al., 2018). Their passive role in the learning process and dependence on teacher guidance can limit their ability to approach writing tasks independently and critically. Furthermore, motivation and initiative play vital roles in academic writing success, with a lack of these factors diminishing students' interest in learning and their willingness to engage with teachers and peers (Irwin, 2019; Tuomainen, 2016).

These challenges, deeply intertwined with linguistic proficiency, cultural differences, reading practices, and motivational factors, present a complex array of barriers to effective academic communication and success within blended

learning environments. There is a clear imperative for targeted investigations that not only identify these hurdles but also scrutinize the strategies students employ to navigate and overcome them, particularly in the context of blended learning where digital and traditional educational methods converge. Understanding the nuances of these challenges and the resilience mechanisms students adopt in these environments can inform the development of comprehensive support systems. Emphasizing the investigation of these aspects, specifically within blended learning settings is a significant opportunity to contribute to optimizing the academic writing capabilities of international students. This focus on identifying the specific challenges these students may face is crucial for ensuring their integration and success in the global academic milieu, ultimately facilitating a more inclusive and effective educational experience.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a multiple case study design, as conceptualized by Yin (2014), to delve into the specific language learning challenges relating to academic English writing within a blended learning environment, particularly focusing on Chinese international high school students. The multiple case study approach was chosen for its effectiveness in educational research, allowing for a deep, contextual investigation of individual experiences and facilitating comparative analysis across different cases (Yin, 2014). This method is ideal for exploring the diverse language learning dynamics in settings that blend EFL and ESL conditions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved.

For the sampling method, this study adheres to purposeful sampling guidelines as outlined by Merriam (2009), with a focus on selecting a manageable yet comprehensive number of participants. In line with the recommendations of Yin (2014) and Eisenhardt (1989), three students were deliberately chosen for this phase to enable an in-depth collection and analysis of data. The selection criteria included diverse factors such as gender, with two males and one female participant, language proficiency levels ranging from upper-intermediate to lower-intermediate, and academic performance spanning from "good" to "fair." These three students were selected based on their voluntary willingness to participate, complemented by teacher recommendations, to ensure the sample's representativeness. This strategic and deliberate selection ensures a comprehensive representation of the student body, capturing a range of experiences within the educational environment.

The data collection process involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the three selected participants. Each interview was based on a set of open-ended questions designed collaboratively by the authors and checked through peer-reviews to ensure validity (Appendix 1) and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in July 2022 and provide a holistic view of the students' English language learning experiences relating to academic writing, offering depth and detail in line with the principles of case study research. During the data collection phase, all three interviewees consented to face-to-face interviews in which the two participants agreed to audio recording

while the third opted for detailed field notes as their preferred method. This variance in data recording methods was primarily due to ethical considerations, ensuring participant comfort and adhering to their individual preferences, a critical aspect of conducting qualitative research respectfully. In keeping with these ethical standards, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. Audio-recorded responses were subsequently transcribed into written Chinese and then translated into English. For the participant who declined audio recording, comprehensive field notes were meticulously documented during the interview and later translated into detailed English notes. This approach not only respected participant choices but also ensured that the data captured was authentic and contextually rich, allowing students to fully understand the questions and articulate their responses effectively in their native language.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), using NVivo 12 for systematic coding and organization of the data. The process began with a careful reading of the transcripts and field notes to identify initial themes, followed by a rigorous member checking procedure where translated scripts were returned to the interviewees for confirmation, as recommended by Creswell (2014). This step ensured the accuracy of translations and the authenticity of the data, enhancing the study's validity. The thematic analysis, grounded in the participants' perspectives, allowed for a detailed exploration of the themes related to academic English writing challenges encountered by the CIHSSs, thereby strengthening the credibility and reliability of the study's conclusions.

In this study, pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewee to ensure confidentiality. For the presentation of findings, data excerpts were labelled according to their source – interview recordings or field notes. For instance, the labels (P1, I1/102-158) and (P2, I2/200-250) were used, where "Participant 1(P1)" and "Participant 2 (P2)" represent the pseudonyms of the participants, "I1" and "I2" indicate the interview session number (first and second interview, respectively), and the numbers following the slash denote the specific segments of the interview transcript. P1 and P2s' interviews were audio-recorded, thus providing a rich textual record. For Participant 3 (P3), who was not recorded, the label (P3, FN/08072022) was used, where "FN" signifies field notes and "08072022" refers to the date these notes were taken, namely July 8, 2022.

4. Findings

The results from NVivo analysis revealed that "communication" was the term most frequently mentioned by the three interviewees, namely P1, P2, and P3. This finding underscores the significant impact that a blended learning environment has on learners, particularly in the realm of communication. Regarding the specific challenges encountered in English academic writing, the study identifies five key categories that remain consistent across the experiences of the interviewees. These include (a) language proficiency limitations, (b) unfamiliarity with academic norms, (c) cultural differences, (d) communication barriers, and (e) technology adaptation challenges. This pattern highlights the multifaceted nature

of challenges that learners face in such an educational setting, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of each category.

4.1 Language Proficiency Limitations

One of the key challenges identified in this study is the limitation of students' language proficiency that affects the competence of their academic English writing. This limitation of language proficiency not only affects the accuracy of expression, but also the diversity of their expression, as well as more advanced forms of expression. For example, the fundamental abilities of vocabulary and grammar especially affect the accuracy of academic writing. P3, as an intermediate level student, demonstrated this in his experience. He stated that he has been struggling with vocabulary and grammar:

"I still struggle with vocabulary and often make grammatical mistakes. Sometimes teachers ask me directly about the meaning of a sentence because the mistakes in the sentence have affected comprehension. I try to use some software, but my language level really, really affects the accuracy of my writing too much." (P3, FN/08072022).

P1, meanwhile, emphasised the complexity he faced in his academic writing. This complexity, in addition to the grammatical vocabulary issues also mentioned by P3, is the academic and formal nature of the language itself. He claimed that despite being able to write *"beautiful sentences that were praised by my teachers"* (P1, I1/270-271):

"The internal logic of the grammar in the sentences was actually more complicated than I thought when I wrote the sentences myself. In addition, I couldn't figure out why my teacher said my language wasn't academic enough" (P1, I1/280-285).

Similarly, P2 expressed that language level, both vocabulary level and linguistic conventions, made it difficult for her to understand complex literature. As she puts it:

"There are so many strange words in literature, yet they seem to be taken for granted by native speakers. I couldn't fully understand the content and even found many expressions strange, not to mention the rhetorical purposes that need to be mentioned when our teachers ask us to write a literary review." (P2, I2/350-358).

These statements emphasise the important correlation between language proficiency and writing achievement. Issues such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and syntactic complexity directly affect students' ability to write and comprehend academic material effectively. This is particularly evident in tasks that require higher-order language skills, such as understanding rhetorical purpose or writing in an academically appropriate style.

4.2 Unfamiliarity with Academic Norms

In addition to the linguistic normative challenges, a significant problem faced by students is unfamiliarity with academic norms, especially in terms of adhering to specific formatting and citation rules. Because the offline native teacher did not

emphasise the importance of formatting, P2 was confused and frustrated when confronted with the demands of the online Canadian teacher:

"The online teacher deducted my marks because I did not follow the MLA format, but my offline teacher did not care about my formatting! I have submitted all my assignments, but I am confused as to why I have to follow these rigid rules." (P2, I2/305-310).

Similarly, P1 noted the difficulty of following citation guidelines and avoiding plagiarism in his writing and was particularly confused about citations and plagiarism. He said:

"I found it difficult to follow citation rules and avoid plagiarism! Why is it counted as plagiarism when I have just quoted someone else to prove my point right?" (P1, I1/245-249).

As for P3 at the intermediate level, he had even more intense negative feelings about the complexity of academic rules:

"Those rules are too complicated to follow. I HATE adjusting the format" (P3, FN/08072022).

These responses reveal a gap in students' understanding of the importance of academic norms and their application in different learning environments. This frustration stems not only from the complexity of the rules, but also from a lack of awareness of why these rules are crucial.

4.3 Cultural Differences

The challenge of cultural differences in academic English writing was another important theme mentioned by students in their understanding of the content of the course topics. Even students who performed well on standardised tests and in their native studies provided feedback on the academic challenges posed by cultural differences.

P1, as an upper intermediate level student, stated that apart from looking up new words and expressions, his biggest challenge in studying the writing materials was the information about the writers involved in the reading materials and his understanding of various writing styles, rhetorical patterns, and organisational structures. Even with the aid of technology, he had difficulty in answering culturally relevant style questions, as in the following passage:

"Although I could look up new words and expressions and even translate sentences and paragraphs with the help of technology, I still find it hard to understand the learning materials or answer my teacher's questions related to the writer or writing styles" (P1, I1/150-157).

P2, also an upper intermediate level student, also expressed challenges in reading and writing materials related to cultural background. Not only did she describe the cultural differences that were not noticed by the Canadian teachers in the online course, but she also expressed her failure to seek help from local teachers who had not studied the culture of the Canadian curriculum in depth. She explained her confusion in the following statement, using "Aboriginal Poetry" as an example:

"The learning materials from ESL online courses sometimes are hard to understand because I don't know the cultural background, while the offline local Chinese teachers cannot help either.... the section Aboriginal Poetry really left me speechless. I don't know anything about Canada's native Aboriginal people, and my Chinese teachers don't need to know this part of history specifically. So, I encountered great challenges in interpreting the poem, and some of the imagery even seemed outrageous to me" (P2, I2/210-215, 222-228).

Although P3 does not mention the impact of cultural diversity in his response, he attributes all of the culture-based challenges to a lack of language proficiency. He notes that *"overall language proficiency limits his understanding of deeper culture"* (P3, FN/08072022); therefore cultural issues are tied to language proficiency.

4.4 Communication Barriers

Communication barriers are a significant obstacle in blended EFL and ESL learning environments, affecting student interaction and academic progress. In P2's view, the disparate platforms of online and offline made it obvious that there were barriers to communicating with her teachers and classmates, and this was particularly evident online:

"Since the online and offline classes were parallel, I could not manage to communicate well with different teachers and different classmates in the limited time. Sometimes, I couldn't even get in touch with my online classmates at all!" (P2, I2/400-403).

P1 also raised the issue about the lack of communication opportunities; however, his response was more directed towards the objective problems caused by the time difference. Since the online course provider was a Canadian high school, the fact that the teacher and the students were in different time zones for the class would have required coordinating schedules, and as he put it:

"The online teacher was in Canada and the schedule may not have been suitable for me to connect with the online teachers" (P1, I1/310-313).

Another aspect of communication barriers highlighted by P3's experience was his hesitation to engage in oral communication in the classroom due to concerns about pronunciation. Classroom activities related to academic writing made him nervous:

"Although there was no face-to-face interaction, I still felt challenged when reading the material from the online course, even if it was just essay topics. Although the teacher encouraged me, I was still worried about my pronunciation, so I would not ask the teacher any questions, nor did I want the teacher to ask me any questions." (P3, FN/08072022).

4.5 Technology Adaptation Challenges

The study also identified computer-related technical skills that also pose significant challenges for students, with the lack of technological competence and unstable Internet connections being significant factors in the learning experience.

Lack of technological competence may be subjectively intimidating or objectively time-consuming. For example, P3 clearly expressed his lack of ease in learning to use new software, "*Learning all this new software is as hard for me as learning a new language.*" (P3, FN/08072022). P1 also expressed his difficulties in dealing with online emergencies and relying on offline support:

"I know the importance of using technology in today's world, but it takes time to learn. I always need to seek help from offline teachers and friends when dealing with computer technology issues. But this doesn't always work, especially when I'm studying an online course at home in the evening" (P1, I1/330-335).

Moreover, the objective barriers of the international network also made the learning experience less than ideal and affected students' learning in the classes. This was mentioned by P2: "*Network crashes happen from time to time*" (P2, I2/450-451). In addition, P2 also mentioned that typing speed also affects students' learning effectiveness: "*I type too slow*" (P2, I2/455).

These descriptions underscore the myriad challenges students encounter in adapting to technology. Navigating the intricacies of new software, addressing technological disruptions, and seeking offline assistance for online issues are among the hurdles students strive to overcome for effective technology utilization. To complicate matters, factors such as slow typing speed exacerbate these difficulties, further hindering their efficiency in completing writing tasks.

According to the findings of the study, students face a number of challenges in a mixed ESL and EFL learning environment. These issues are of concern, especially those that have arisen in the course of time and due to technology as well as those that students may still face during their college career. Addressing these issues is critical to enhancing the student learning experience.

5. Discussion

This study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Chinese international high school students (CIHSSs) in acquiring academic English writing skills in a blended EFL and ESL learning environment. The challenges identified encompass language proficiency limitations, unfamiliarity with academic norms, cultural differences, communication barriers, and technology adaptation challenges. These findings not only corroborate the existing literature on basic theories and language learning difficulties in academic English writing, but also offer new insights into the specific context of blended learning.

The initial point of this analysis concerns language proficiency limitations. In line with former studies, this study underpins the importance of language proficiency level in academic English writing (Maulida et al., 2022). Additionally, our findings reveal that students at various proficiency levels face distinct challenges. This suggests the need for educators to provide diverse instructional materials, tailored to address these different levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, it encourages students to adopt a range of language learning strategies (Matiso, 2023). These strategies are crucial in addressing specific linguistic challenges and enhancing proficiency in academic English (Zhang & Zou, 2022) This approach is

not only pedagogically sound but also instrumental in deepening the understanding of language learning complexities.

In terms of the unfamiliarity of academic norms, CIHSSs often lack awareness of standard academic formats and their significance. This study suggests an active role for both online and offline teachers in addressing this gap. Online teachers should not only mandate the use of standard formats but also explain their importance to help students understand the rationale behind adhering to these formats. Similarly, offline teachers in Chinese local schools should integrate format requirements into their regular teaching. While the traditional focus has been on content mastery and achieving higher grades (Sang, 2017), it is equally important for students to recognize the significance of academic formatting and general rules. This approach encourages students to take the initiative in their learning process, aligning with the strategic self-regulation model proposed by Oxford (2012). Such proactive learning goes beyond teacher guidance, fostering greater motivation in students to acquire comprehensive academic skills.

Consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this study underscores the significant impact of cultural challenges on student learning. The findings echo previous research on the anxiety and cultural shock experienced by students in foreign educational environments (Parther, 2022). Similar to international students who face culture shock when studying abroad, students participating in online overseas courses from their home country encounter comparable challenges. To address these issues, it is crucial for educators to provide supportive measures that facilitate students' adaptation to diverse cultural contexts. Simultaneously, students should actively engage in various acculturation strategies to ease their transition (Berry, 2005, 2007). This dual approach can effectively mitigate the cultural challenges faced in such unique educational settings.

Another issue consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory relates to communication barriers in blended learning environments. According to this theory, communication is essential for the internalization of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, in blended learning, objective barriers can impede this process. Teachers in online settings face a broad spectrum of communication challenges, including technical difficulties, cultural differences, and general communication issues (Guo & Asmawi, 2023). These challenges are consistent with the experiences reported by students in this study. Despite suggestions that teachers can enhance their preparation to tackle these issues effectively, it is important to recognize students' motivation to resolve these challenges. For those students who have the willingness to address these problems, teachers should offer appropriate support to facilitate a seamless class flow. Conversely, for students apprehensive about the online environment, specific strategies should be implemented to help them overcome their fears and engage successfully in the learning process.

In the unique context of blended learning, the prominence of information technology issues is evident. A major challenge in this setting is adapting to

technology, which significantly impacts students' learning experiences and outcomes. This aligns with Prensky's concept of digital natives: although students may be generally familiar with technology, specific skills and training are necessary for its effective academic use (Prensky, 2010; Spiegel, 2021). Enhancing digital literacy and providing technical support are key to facilitating a smoother learning process for students. Additionally, the role of students' intrinsic motivation is crucial, resonating with Zimmerman's self-regulation strategy and Oxford's strategic self-regulation model (S2R model). According to these theories, students employ self-regulation strategies to address challenges in their learning journey, including the need to manage their language learning processes (Oxford, 2011, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). These strategies are vital for students to adapt to and overcome external factors that influence their learning in a blended environment.

6. Conclusion

This research embarked on uncovering the intricate challenges CIHSSs face in mastering academic English writing within a blended EFL and ESL environment. Our exploration identified critical hurdles such as language proficiency limitations, unfamiliarity with academic norms, cultural differences, communication barriers, and the challenges of technological adaptation. Through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and supported by insights from Zimmerman's self-regulation strategy and Oxford's strategic S2R model, this study not only confirms existing theories on language learning difficulties but also brings to light the nuanced challenges within the blended learning context.

Key findings highlight the pivotal role of language proficiency and the necessity for differentiated instructional materials and strategies to cater to diverse learner needs. The study emphasizes the importance of academic norm awareness, facilitated by a proactive role from educators, both online and offline, to bridge students' knowledge gaps. Moreover, it underscores the impact of cultural and communication barriers on learning, advocating for supportive measures and acculturation strategies to aid students' adaptation. Technology adaptation emerges as a significant factor, pointing to the need for enhanced digital literacy and technical support to improve the blended learning experience.

While this study offers valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by CIHSSs and calls for a holistic educational approach, it acknowledges certain limitations that warrant consideration. The research's geographical focus and the qualitative nature of its methodology may limit the generalizability of its findings across different contexts and populations. Future research directions could therefore include expanding the geographical scope and incorporating quantitative analyses to broaden the understanding of these challenges. Ultimately, addressing these limitations and pursuing these research avenues can contribute to a more inclusive, effective, and enriching educational journey for international students, ensuring their success in the global academic community.

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Chinese International High School Students' English Language Learning Experiences in a Blended Learning Environment with both ESL and EFL Curricula

The questions will cover:

- 1) Basic information about grades, language proficiency level and course level,
- 2) Blended learning experiences, including the contents and the challenges, and
- 3) Experiences of dealing with the challenges both offline and online

A: Brief Introduction

Overall: Introduce the interviewer and the purpose of the interview

The purpose of this interview is to have a deep understanding of your language learning experiences in a blended learning environment. Your responses are very important for my study as this will set the direction of my future study. These interview transcripts will be for study purposes only and will not influence your academic performance. All your responses will be confidential, so relax and answer the questions honestly. Thank you very much.

B: Main Questions:

- What's your grade in your high school? How about the language proficiency level (ranking in your school and the standard test)? How about your course level for both online and offline?
- What does your ESL course cover? (Both specific subjects, learning objectives or materials mentioned by the teachers and the explanation by the students are acceptable)
- Which parts do you think are special in the course in terms of academic writing?
- What abilities have you gained from your learning process? How about the abilities related to academic writing?
- What difficulties and challenges do you face in the learning process of academic writing? Are there any other factors that would make you feel challenged during the whole process?
- Have these challenges been solved yet? If solved, how did you solve the problems and to whom did you turn asking for help? If unsolved, why?
- How do you feel while you are struggling with the challenges? And how about the process of solving them?
- Have you encountered any problems or challenges in communicating with teachers?
- Can you share something about your cooperation with your peers? How about in terms of writing? Please add your survey questions.