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When the Instructor Isn't Enough: Student Perspectives on Pedagogical and Structural Innovations in Transnational Composition

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ABSTRACT: *This mixed-methods study, which is grounded in sociocultural theory, examines students' perceptions of pedagogical effectiveness in a U.S.-accredited first-year composition course (ENG 1430) delivered face-to-face at a Sino-American transnational university in China. Survey data ($N = 63$) and semistructured interviews ($n = 15$) reveal two equally influential factors shaping student experience and writing development: (1) the instructor as the primary mediational scaffold within the zone of proximal development and (2) curricular and structural design features (class duration, workload distribution, grouping strategy, and assessment clarity). Despite strong writing self-efficacy ($M = 5.01/7$) and self-directed learning tendencies ($M = 4.59/7$), course enjoyment remained only moderate ($M = 2.78/4$), with students attributing this gap to structural constraints rather than instructor quality. Drawing on sociocultural*

theory and the process approach to writing, this study translates these student-generated insights into transferable design innovations for intensive writing courses in transnational higher education.

Keywords: transnational education, first-year writing, sociocultural theory, course design, educational development

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Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) partnerships have become a defining feature of twenty-first-century higher education, with Sino-foreign cooperative universities among the most significant expansions. The Cross-Border Educational Research Team lists 51 campuses hosted in China (*International Campuses*, 2026), enrolling tens of thousands of Chinese students in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs that award Western degrees on Chinese soil. These institutions import U.S., U.K., and Australian curricula while serving predominantly domestic cohorts, creating unique sites of cultural and pedagogical mediation where students must navigate competing academic traditions (Hang & Zhang, 2025; Noman et al., 2023).

Within these transnational contexts, first-year composition courses function as critical transition points. Chinese students entering Sino-American universities receive extensive prior writing instruction, but it is typically product oriented, teacher-fronted, and examination driven (T. Huang et al., 2025). They have learned to produce error-free prose for high-stakes assessments such as the Gao Kao (National College Entrance Examination), where memorized templates and formulaic structures are rewarded. The pedagogical demands of U.S.-accredited first-year writing, multiple drafts, peer-response workshops, instructor conferences, and an emphasis on developing an authentic academic voice represent a fundamental departure from these prior experiences (Hang & Zhang, 2025). Students must shift from passive knowledge reproduction to active, iterative knowledge construction, a transition that is both cognitively demanding and identity challenging (Noman et al., 2023). Recent scholarship in transnational higher education has examined this transition more closely, highlighting how Chinese students both integrate and resist unfamiliar pedagogical approaches as they adapt to new academic environments (Miani, 2026).

However, the challenges extend beyond the classroom. Chinese students pursuing American-accredited education at transnational campuses in China navigate not only pedagogical differences but also broader geopolitical tensions that shape their educational trajectories. As X. Wang (2024) documents, students at Sino-American universities must reconcile their desire for U.S.-accredited education with a growing awareness of social and political instability in the United States. Concerns about gun violence, racial discrimination, and a polarized political environment influence both their initial decision to remain in China for

their degrees and their day-to-day sense of security, even on Chinese soil (X. Wang, 2024). This geopolitical dimension adds a layer of affective complexity to the already demanding academic transition, reminding us that students' writing development is not insulated from these broader sociopolitical realities, a point rarely addressed in writing pedagogy research.

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) offers a powerful lens for understanding how these students navigate writing development under such conditions. From an SCT perspective, learning to write is not an individual's cognitive achievement but a socially mediated process in which development occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through interaction with more knowledgeable others and cultural tools (Prior, 2006; Thorne & Lantolf, 2007). Writing is understood as distributed, dialogic, and mediated by both human and material resources (Rish et al., 2015). The process approach to writing, with its emphasis on prewriting, drafting, peer response, revision, and teacher conferencing, can be understood as a pedagogical enactment of these SCT principles (Flower & Hayes, 1981; T. Huang, 2025). In Chinese EFL contexts, such process-oriented frameworks have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing writing performance and reducing anxiety (Fu & Liu, 2025; T. Huang, 2025; Wang & Ganapathy, 2025).

However, the application of sociocultural theory to transnational writing pedagogy has been uneven. Some scholars have critiqued SCT for overemphasizing the social context at the expense of individual cognition, arguing that the theoretical inseparability of the individual and the social risks dissolving individual agency into the social environment (Sawyer, 2002; Tenenbergh & Knobelsdorf, 2014). Within writing pedagogy specifically, existing research has focused primarily on interpersonal scaffolding, the role of teachers and peers as more knowledgeable others, with less attention given to what might be termed structural mediational tools: the institutional and curricular artifacts that shape how writing development unfolds (Cheng & Xu, 2025; Pearson, 2024). Class duration, workload distribution across the semester, peer-work grouping policies, and the transparency of assessment criteria are not merely administrative details; they are cultural tools that mediate student engagement, cognitive load, and, ultimately, writing development. When these structural features are misaligned with students' needs, even the scaffolding of the most skilled instructor may be insufficient.

At Sino-foreign cooperative universities, where students are already navigating significant cultural and pedagogical transitions, understanding the interplay between interpersonal and structural mediation is particularly urgent. First-year Chinese students at these institutions face reduced adult supervision compared with their secondary schooling, limited prior experience with self-directed learning, and institutional orientations that may not fully prepare them for the flexibility required (Q. Huang et al., 2024). However, research also documents their considerable resilience: many students exercise significant agency and develop proactive self-management strategies and flexible mindsets when facing academic challenges (Hang & Zhang, 2025). As Heng (2020) argues, the prevailing image of Chinese international students as passive recipients of

Western curricula has been replaced by a more nuanced understanding of their active agency and resourcefulness. These findings suggest that well-designed structural support amplifies students' existing capacities, turning potential obstacles into scaffolds for development.

Despite growing scholarly attention to transnational education and writing pedagogy in Chinese contexts, three significant gaps remain. First, limited empirical work has been conducted at Sino-foreign transnational campuses where U.S.-accredited writing curricula are delivered face-to-face to Chinese student cohorts in China. Second, studies have paid insufficient attention to structural and institutional mediational tools, class length, workload pacing, grouping policy, assessment transparency, and instructor-level variables. Third, the role of family as a peripheral participant in students' self-directed learning, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts, remains underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps through a convergent mixed-methods investigation of student experiences in a U.S.-accredited first-year composition course (ENG 1430) delivered face-to-face at a Sino-American transnational university in eastern China. Guided by sociocultural theory, we propose the following:

1. How do Chinese first-year students perceive the factors that enable and constrain their writing development and course engagement?
2. How do instructor-level scaffolding and structural/curricular design features interact in shaping student experience?
3. What transferable innovations in curriculum design emerge from integrating quantitative ratings with qualitative accounts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory and the Process Approach to Writing

Writing development in an additional language is widely understood as socially mediated (Thorne & Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development (ZPD), "the distance between the actual developmental level... and the level of potential development... under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), is operationalized in writing classrooms through scaffolding, feedback, peer collaboration, and iterative drafting (Prior, 2006; Rish et al., 2015). Contemporary accounts characterize writing as distributed, dialogic, and mediated by cultural tools (Allami et al., 2025; Cheng & Xu, 2025; Prior, 2006).

Four tenets of a sociocultural approach to writing, drawn from Rish et al. (2015), are particularly relevant to this study: writing as social practice (rather than solitary production), distributed authorship (knowledge coconstructed across people and tools), mediation by cultural tools (including both material resources and institutional structures), and intertextuality/dialogism (writing as a response to prior texts). These tenets align closely with the process approach to writing instruction, which emphasizes prewriting, drafting, peer response, revision, and

editing as iterative, socially mediated activities (Flower & Hayes, 1981; T. Huang, 2025; X. Wang & Ganapathy, 2025).

Empirical studies in L2 writing contexts have demonstrated the effectiveness of SCT-informed instruction. Allami et al. (2025) reported that SCT-informed pedagogy significantly improved IELTS writing performance, particularly in terms of task response, coherence, and cohesion. In Chinese EFL contexts specifically, process-oriented frameworks rooted in SCT have been shown to enhance writing performance while reducing learner anxiety (T. Huang, 2025). Concept-based genre teaching, another SCT-informed approach, promotes L2 writing development through structured peer talk and collaborative meaning-making (Fu & Liu, 2025). Together, these studies establish that when writing instruction is designed to leverage social mediation, learners achieve stronger outcomes than through product-oriented approaches alone.

It is worth noting, however, that sociocultural theory is not the only framework for understanding writing development. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, with its emphasis on self-efficacy and individual agency, offers a complementary perspective that foregrounds the learner's cognitive and motivational resources. While SCT focuses on social mediation, social cognitive theory highlights the role of self-belief and personal agency in shaping learning outcomes, a distinction that has implications for how researchers interpret students' self-reported confidence and autonomy in writing contexts (Bandura, 2006; Shen & Bai, 2024).

Transnational Writing Pedagogy and Sino-Foreign Contexts

Sino-foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs) present distinctive conditions for writing development. Students entering these institutions navigate a transition from collectivist, exam-oriented educational traditions to pedagogical environments that prize individual critical thinking and active participation (Hang & Zhang, 2025; Noman et al., 2023). First-year Chinese students at SFCUs face multiple challenges: adapting to English-medium instruction, adjusting to faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds, and managing the reduced structure and increased demands for self-directed learning of Western-accredited curricula (Noman et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has complicated the deficit narratives of Chinese international and transnational students. Drawing on longitudinal interview data, Heng (2020) demonstrated that Chinese students actively exercise agency and resourcefulness as they adapt to new academic environments rather than being passive recipients of Western curricula. This agency, however, operates within constraints. Traditional Confucian expectations of teacher–student relationships, emphasizing deference and respect for hierarchical authority, often clash with Western norms that value open dialogue, critical questioning, and informal student–instructor interaction (Heng, 2020). Students must therefore navigate not only linguistic and academic transitions but also competing cultural frameworks for what it means to be a “good student”.

Extending this line of inquiry to the specific context of Sino-American transnational universities, Miani (2026) examines how first-year students

experience and respond to lecture-based pedagogy in China's transnational higher education. Drawing on interviews with students at a Sino-foreign university, Miani documents both integration and resistance as students navigate unfamiliar pedagogical modes, highlighting how students' prior educational experiences shape their expectations and engagement with transnational curricula. This work underscores the importance of understanding student perspectives as a site of negotiation rather than simple adaptation.

The transition to transnational higher education can be particularly acute for first-year students. Q. Huang et al. (2024) identify several structural factors that contribute to early academic difficulties among Chinese first-year students: reduced adult supervision compared with secondary schooling, inadequate college-level preparation (rather than test-focused training), limited involvement in their own university application processes, and insufficient institutional orientation. Importantly, however, many students in their study recovered from academic setbacks, such as probation, through proactive self-management and flexible mindsets, suggesting that existing student resilience could be amplified with better structural support (Q. Huang et al., 2024).

Within this broader context of transition, process-oriented writing instruction has shown promise. In Chinese EFL settings, process-oriented frameworks have been found to reduce writing anxiety and enhance performance, although their effectiveness depends on supportive structural conditions (T. Huang, 2025; X. Wang & Ganapathy, 2025). Such a finding suggests that the success of pedagogical approaches in transnational contexts depends not only on instructor skill but also on the alignment of institutional structures with students' needs.

Student Voice and Course Design in Writing Pedagogy

Sustainable innovation in writing curricula requires systematic attention to student feedback (Pearson, 2024; Tuhkala et al., 2021). Mixed-methods designs have proven particularly valuable for revealing the interplay between student agency and institutional constraints (Cheng & Xu, 2025). Engagement with feedback, encompassing affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions, is mediated by factors such as proficiency, enjoyment, digital literacy, beliefs about learning, and the quality of teacher–student relationships (Cheng & Xu, 2025; Pearson, 2024).

Involving students in curriculum design can yield meaningful pedagogical changes, but it also raises tensions related to differences in expertise, expectations, and interests between students and instructors (Tuhkala et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship in transnational writing pedagogy has extended this focus on student voice by examining how students negotiate the use of pedagogical tools and technologies. Duffy and Lin (2026), for instance, investigate Grammarly adoption in a Sino-American writing classroom and report that students' decisions to use or resist the tool constituted a site of cultural-pedagogical negotiation in which institutional expectations, instructor scaffolding, and student agency intersected. Their findings suggest that student perspectives on pedagogical tools can reveal deeper tensions about autonomy, authority, and the nature of writing development in transnational contexts.

The present study contributes to this line of inquiry by centering student perspectives on both interpersonal and structural elements of writing instruction, offering insights that bridge student experience with actionable curriculum innovation.

METHOD

Design and Context

This study employed an exploratory, convergent, parallel, mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to investigate student experiences in ENG 1430 (First-Year Composition), a compulsory U.S.-accredited writing course delivered face-to-face at a Sino-American transnational campus in eastern China. The institution enrolls approximately 4,000 Chinese undergraduates in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs. Data were collected in spring and summer of 2025.

Participants and Procedures

Students who completed ENG 1430 between 2022 and 2025 were invited to complete an anonymous online survey. Among the 80 eligible students, 63 responded (55 face-to-face, eight online), yielding a response rate of 78%. The survey combined validated scales, including the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (Ryan, 1982), a perceived competence/self-efficacy scale adapted from Bandura (2006), and the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (Guglielmino, 1977), with demographic and open-response items.

From survey respondents who volunteered for follow-up, 15 students (eight females, seven males; all Chinese nationals; aged 18–20) were purposively selected to maximize variation across genders, self-reported English proficiency, and course performance. One-on-one, semistructured interviews lasting 35–65 minutes were conducted in May 2025, either in Mandarin or English according to participant preference, and were audio-recorded via Zoom with informed consent. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated into English. The semistructured interview guide explored students' academic adjustment, relationships with instructors and peers, experiences with peer collaboration, use of translation apps, perceptions of course structure, and the role of family expectations in their academic engagement.

Data Sources

The quantitative data comprised 42 Likert items (using 4-point, 5-point, and 7-point scales) measuring intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, self-directed learning, sense of belonging, and self-reported English proficiency. The qualitative data consisted of 15 interview transcripts totaling approximately 180,000 Chinese characters. The combination of these data sources enabled a comprehensive examination of both the breadth and depth of students' experiences in the transnational writing course.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS 28. All the scales demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87-.94$). The qualitative data were subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) guided by a sociocultural lens. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data; subsequent coding rounds were structured around key sociocultural concepts (mediation, scaffolding, and cultural tools). Thematic saturation was assessed iteratively through team discussion and was achieved after 12 interviews based on thematic redundancy; the remaining 3 interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and ensure representativeness.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative strands occurred at the interpretation stage through joint display tables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), enabling systematic comparisons of survey patterns with thematic findings.

Researcher positionality

The first author is an American faculty member at the study site who taught the course in prior years but had no supervisory relationship with participants during the study period. The interviews were conducted by bilingual coauthors (Huang, Zhu, and Shi), allowing participants to communicate in their preferred language and reducing potential power imbalances associated with instructor–student dynamics. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis to monitor potential bias, and peer debriefing sessions were conducted with coauthors to harmonize interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the institutional review board (WKUIRB2024-97/Re) prior to data collection. All the participants provided informed consent: electronically for the survey and in writing for the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Data were stored securely on password-protected institutional servers with access restricted to the research team; all identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity. The procedures complied with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings in relation to the study's three research questions: (1) how Chinese first-year students perceive the factors that enable and constrain their writing development and course engagement, (2) how instructor scaffolding and structural design features interact, and (3) what transferable innovations emerge from integrating student data. The results are organized into a quantitative overview, qualitative themes, and mixed-methods integration.

Quantitative Overview

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the primary constructs (n = 63).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs (n=63)

Construct (scale)	Items	M (SD)	Range	α
Course enjoyment/interest (4-pt)	6	2.81 (0.74)	1-4	.85
Perceived course challenge (4-pt)	1	2.87 (0.81)	1-4	-
Perceived usefulness for studies/career (4-pt)	3	2.92(0.79)	1-4	.88
Perceived competence/self-efficacy (7-pt)	4	5.00 (1.15)	1-7	.92
Self-directed learning (7pt)	10	4.59 (0.98)	1-7	.94
Sense of belonging (reverse scored, 5pt)	3	2.41 (0.97)	1-5	.85

Several patterns in Table 1 warrant elaboration. First, the students reported high perceived competence in their writing ability ($M = 5.00$ on a 7-point scale), indicating that they felt capable and confident as academic writers. This was complemented by strong self-directed learning tendencies ($M = 4.59$ on a 7-point scale), suggesting that the students were proactive in managing their own learning and independently seeking out resources. However, course enjoyment and interest remained only moderate ($M = 2.81$ on a 4-point scale), meaning that the students did not find the course particularly engaging or enjoyable despite feeling competent in it. Similarly, perceived usefulness for studying and career was moderate ($M = 2.92$ on a 4-point scale), indicating that while students recognized some value in the course, they did not view it as highly relevant to their future academic or professional goals. The sense of belonging scale, which was reverse scored, yielded a relatively low mean ($M = 2.41$ on a 5-point scale), suggesting that students generally did not feel excluded or disconnected from the course community. Collectively, this quantitative pattern, in which high competence and self-direction coexist with only moderate enjoyment and perceived usefulness, suggests that residual dissatisfaction may be attributable to structural rather than motivational deficits.

Qualitative Themes

Reflexive thematic analysis generated five themes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Thematic map: Five pillars of student experience in transnational first-year writing

Theme 1: Instructor as primary mediational scaffold Participants positioned the instructor as the central "more knowledgeable other". Jacky: "70 % of my grade comes from the professor... his precise feedback is the core of my improvement." Cathy: "She is my goddess... she reads every draft carefully." Corroborated quantitatively: self-efficacy → enjoyment $r = .58$, $p < .001$.	Theme 2: Curricular and institutional mediational tools as enablers/constraints The three-hour class block was the most frequent complaint. David: "First 90 minutes focused; after two hours my brain is tired." Sophia: "Deadlines too concentrated → have to rush." Mike: "Group-task rubrics unclear → feel lost." These structural artefacts mediated engagement as powerfully as instructor behaviour.	Theme 3: Transformation from product- to process-oriented writer identity Every interviewee described a profound shift. Emma: "Before I had no idea how to start... now I can independently complete a full academic paper with confidence." Directly reflected in self-efficacy $M = 5.01/7$.
Theme 4: Peer collaboration as distributed co-authorship Fixed groups fostered efficiency and mutual reminders; random groups broadened perspectives. Face-to-face was preferred over WeChat for idea generation. Quantitative belonging scores confirm low exclusion feelings.	Theme 5: Family as peripheral, low-pressure participants Almost universal absence of academic pressure. Jacky: "My parents trust me completely → I feel responsible and study harder." Corroborated by self-directed learning $M = 4.59/6$.	

Theme 1: Instructors as Primary Mediational Scaffolds in the ZPD

Participants overwhelmingly positioned the instructor as the central “more knowledgeable other”. Jacky (P10) attributed “70% of my success” to the professor’s “precise, caring feedback”. Cathy stated that the professor's one-to-one revisions were “invaluable; she is my goddess”. Even moderate critics acknowledged detailed marking and timely response (Emma, Bob). Only one negative case was described, in which perceived rigidity in the grading of deadlines was noted. This finding aligns with the quantitative finding that perceived instructor support is the strongest predictor of course satisfaction ($r = .62$, $p < .001$).

Jacky (male):

'70% of my grade comes from the professor. His precise feedback and caring style are the core of my improvement.'

Cathy (female):

‘She is my goddess ... she reads every draft carefully and tells me exactly how to revise.’

Even critical voices acknowledged detailed, timely feedback as the most potent enabler of writing development.

Theme 2: Curricular Tools and Institutional Mediated Tools as enablers/Constraints

Structural features frequently limit the effectiveness of even highly regarded instructors. The near-universal complaint was the three-hour class block:

David:

‘First 90 minutes I’m focused; after two hours my brain is tired, and I zone out.’

Hayden and Sophia highlighted clustered deadlines and unclear group-task rubrics as additional barriers. These institutional artifacts mediated engagement as powerfully as instructor behavior did. The near-three-hour class duration emerged as the most frequent complaint (David, Hayden, Sophia), producing fatigue and reduced attention in the second half. Deadline clustering and occasional lack of clarity in group-task rubrics (Mike) were also criticized. These structural artifacts mediated engagement negatively despite strong instructor scaffolding.

Theme 3: Transformation of Writer Identity through the Process Approach

Every participant described a marked identity shift in how they viewed themselves as writers. Before the course, the students characterized themselves as uncertain and unfamiliar with academic writing conventions. Postcourse, they described themselves as capable, independent writers who could structure arguments and revise effectively.

Emma (precourse):

‘I had no idea how to start an English academic paper.’

Emma (postcourse):

‘Now I can independently complete a full paper with a logical framework and an authentic voice.’

Students explicitly attributed this transformation, from anxious novices to confident, process-oriented writers, to repeated drafting, peer review, and teacher conferencing. Every participant described a shift from viewing writing as a solitary product to a distributed, iterative process. Precourse, many “had no idea how to start an English academic paper” (Jacky); postcourse, they reported mastery of logical frameworks, authentic voice, and revision cycles. These self-reported changes directly reflect the process approach embedded in the curriculum.

Theme 4: Peer collaboration as distributed coauthorship

Fixed versus random grouping produced contrasting experiences. Fixed groups fostered familiarity and mutual deadline reminders (Sophia, Bob); random

groups expanded perspectives and adaptability (Mike, Jacky). Face-to-face interaction was unanimously preferred over WeChat for idea generation.

Theme 5: Families as peripheral, low-pressure participants

Chinese families rarely exerted direct academic pressure; instead, they offered “trust and freedom”. This absence of external forces appeared to facilitate the high self-directed learning scores observed quantitatively:

Journal:

‘My parents trust me completely → I feel responsible and study harder.’

Integration of mixed methods

Table 2 presents a joint display linking the strongest quantitative and qualitative findings.

Table 2. Joint Display: Integration of Quantitative Scores and Qualitative Themes

Theme	Core Qualitative	Quantitative	Exact
	Claim	Corroboration	Statistic
	‘70% of my		
1. Instructor as primary scaffold	success is the professor’s feedback’ (Jacky)	Self-efficacy → enjoyment	$r = .58^{***}$
2. Structural mediational tools as bottlenecks	‘Three-hour class – fatigue after 90 min’ (David, Hayden)	Moderate enjoyment despite high competence	Enjoyment $M = 2.78/4$
3. Transformation of writer identity	‘From “no idea” to independent paper’ (Emma, Cathy)	Writing self-efficacy	$M = 5.01/7$ (top quartile)

4.	Peer collaboration as distributed authorship	‘Fixed group = efficiency; random = new ideas’ (Mike)		Reverse score M = 2.41/5 (low exclusion)
		Strong sense of belonging		
5.	Low-pressure family context enables agency.	“Family trust – I feel free and responsible” (almost all)		M = 4.59/7 (very high)
		Self-directed learning		

The integration reveals that high self-efficacy and self-directedness coexist with only moderate course enjoyment, as structural mediational tools (class length, workload pacing, assessment transparency) act as significant bottlenecks.

These findings are consistent across the dataset. The consistency between quantitative patterns and qualitative accounts, i.e., students' high levels of competence and self-direction paired with moderate enjoyment, their identification of structural constraints, and their reports of identity transformation, provides triangulation. The convergence of survey responses and interview data across multiple themes, drawn from a sample that maximized variation in gender, proficiency, and performance, suggests that these patterns are not idiosyncratic but reflect broadly shared student experiences. As such, they offer transferable implications for curriculum innovation in intensive writing programs in transnational contexts: structural redesign (e.g., shorter class sessions, staggered deadlines, transparent rubrics) may be just as consequential as excellent instruction in shaping student engagement and writing development.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings in relation to the study's three research questions: (1) how Chinese first-year students perceive the factors that enable and constrain their writing development and course engagement, (2) how instructor scaffolding and structural design features interact, and (3) what transferable curriculum innovations emerge from integrating student quantitative and qualitative data.

The most striking finding, captured most directly in Theme 2, is the perceived equivalence of two pedagogical pillars: instructor scaffolding and curricular/structural design features. These findings directly address research

question (RQ) 1 (how students perceive enabling and constraining factors) and RQ2 (how interpersonal and structural elements interact). While sociocultural theory has traditionally foregrounded the instructor as the primary ‘more knowledgeable other’ facilitating development within the zone of proximal development (Allami et al., 2025; Fu & Liu, 2025; Vygotsky, 1978), participants consistently insisted that institutional mediational tools, class duration, workload pacing, assessment transparency, and grouping policy, captured in Theme 2 as curricular and institutional mediational tools, were equally, if not occasionally more, consequential in shaping their writing development and course engagement.

This finding matters because it challenges the implicit assumption in much of the research on writing pedagogy that excellent teaching can overcome structural constraints. When the students in this study identified structural bottlenecks as equally important to instructor quality, they did not diminish the value of good teaching; rather, they pointed to a fundamental design flaw in intensive writing courses: the belief that skilled instructors can compensate for poorly designed structures. The implications are clear: writing programs that invest heavily in instructor development while neglecting course design may address only half the equation.

This finding extends prior SCT applications in L2 writing, which often emphasize interpersonal scaffolding (e.g., teacher feedback, peer collaboration; Cheng & Xu, 2025), by highlighting the critical role of structural artifacts in the activity system. In transnational contexts, such as Sino-foreign cooperative universities, where students face competing cultural and pedagogical expectations (Hang & Zhang, 2025; Noman et al., 2023), these structural constraints appear to mediate the effectiveness of even highly regarded instructors.

The moderate course enjoyment ratings ($M = 2.78/4$), despite strong writing self-efficacy ($M = 5.01/7$) and self-directed learning tendencies ($M = 4.59/7$), underscore this interplay. This pattern is noteworthy: students who felt confident and capable as writers and who were proactive in managing their own learning nevertheless reported only lukewarm engagement with the course itself. This suggests that their dissatisfaction was not a motivational issue; they were not disengaged or apathetic but rather a structural one. The fatigue from three-hour classes, the cognitive overload from clustered deadlines, and the frustration with unclear rubrics were experienced as barriers that even excellent instruction could not fully eliminate. Students attributed residual dissatisfaction not to motivational deficits but to structural bottlenecks, such as three-hour class blocks that induce fatigue (David, Hayden) and clustered deadlines that prompt rushed work (Sophia). This pattern aligns with recent mixed-methods investigations of L2 feedback engagement, where the cognitive load from simultaneous task demands reduces uptake despite positive affective responses (Cheng & Xu, 2025; Pearson, 2024). In Chinese EFL settings, process-oriented approaches have been shown to alleviate anxiety and enhance performance (T. Huang, 2025; Wang & Ganapathy, 2025); however, their efficacy depends on supportive structural conditions, the findings of which are echoed here.

The transformation of writer identity (Theme 3) further illustrates the distributed nature of SCT. The participants shifted from viewing writing as a

solitary, product-focused activity to a dialogic, iterative process, crediting them to repeat their drafting and conferencing with their newfound confidence. This transformation is significant not only because students improved as writers but also because it reveals how the process approach functions as a mediational tool in its own right, shaping not only writing skills but also students' sense of themselves as capable, autonomous writers. These findings align with concept-based genre interventions in Chinese EFL classrooms, where peer talk and scaffolding promote conceptual understanding and autonomous application (Fu & Liu, 2025). Peer collaboration (Theme 4), as distributed coauthorship, whether through fixed groups for efficiency or random groups for broader perspectives, reduced feelings of exclusion in belonging scores, which is consistent with the findings of engagement research emphasizing relational factors (Pearson, 2024). Here again, the implication is that structural choices, grouping policy, are not merely administrative but shape students' sense of belonging and engagement. Finally, the low-pressure family context (Theme 5), as a peripheral participant, facilitated high self-directed learning, reflecting collectivist cultural norms in which autonomy thrived without external coercion (Hang & Zhang, 2025; Shen & Bai, 2024). These findings challenge deficit narratives that assume that Chinese families exert excessive pressure; instead, the absence of such pressure may create space for self-directed learning to flourish.

These insights challenge writing programs to adopt a holistic activity-system perspective, recognizing that instructor excellence alone cannot compensate for the constraints of mediational tools. Such a perspective reframes course design as a pedagogical act: one as consequential as lesson planning or feedback practices. In Sino-foreign contexts, where first-year students face accentuated transitions (Noman et al., 2023), structural redesign is particularly urgent.

Implications

The implications extend beyond simply reporting what students said. The student voices in this study point to deeper principles for curriculum design in transnational writing contexts.

The practical innovations listed below are not merely student suggestions; they are manifestations of a broader principle: that structural redesign is a pedagogical intervention. When students request shorter class sessions, they are not merely expressing a preference for convenience; they are identifying a cognitive constraint, sustained attention, that directly impacts learning. When they request staggered deadlines, they point to the limits of working memory and the importance of distributed practice. When they request clearer rubrics, they are articulating a need for transparency that reduces anxiety and supports self-regulated learning.

Practical Innovations Derived Directly from Student Voice

1. **Three-hour blocks were split into 90–100-minute sessions** (David, Hayden) with active breaks or flipped elements, addressing the fatigue noted in SFCU transitions (Noman et al., 2023). The implication here is that attention span is not a fixed trait but a structural constraint that course design can accommodate.
2. **Stagger major assignment deadlines across the semester** (Sophia) rather than clustering in weeks 8–12. This addresses cognitive load theory: when students face multiple high-stakes tasks simultaneously, the quality of their work decreases regardless of their motivation or skill level.
3. **Provide explicit, coconstructed rubrics** (Mike) for group tasks at the outset. Transparency in assessment reduces anxiety and supports students' self-regulation, particularly for those navigating unfamiliar academic cultures.
4. **Offer both fixed and random grouping options** to strike a balance between efficiency and perspective-taking. This acknowledges that peer collaboration serves multiple functions: some students benefit from stability, while others benefit from a diversity of perspectives.
5. **The culturally situated, low-pressure family context** (Jacky) to nurture self-directed learning further (Shen & Bai, 2024). These findings suggest that educators partner with, rather than intervene in, the family dynamics that support student autonomy.

These student-generated innovations align with process-genre frameworks proven effective in Chinese EFL (T. Huang, 2025; Wang & Ganapathy, 2025) and call for greater student voice in curriculum design, despite recognized tensions around perceived expertise and implementation (Tuhkala et al., 2021). By prioritizing structural alongside interpersonal scaffolding, programs can better support the identity shifts observed here, from anxious novices to confident, process-oriented writers.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This single-institution study limits generalizability, although the Sino-American context offers valuable insights for similar transnational programs. Reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias; future research can incorporate classroom observations, keystroke logging, or longitudinal writing samples to capture behavioral engagement more directly (Pearson, 2024). Additionally, although the first author had no supervisory relationship with participants during the study period, his prior role as an ENG 1430 instructor was disclosed. This potential bias was mitigated by the use of bilingual interviewers and anonymized data collection. Comparative studies across SFCUs or contrasting face-to-face and online modalities could further illuminate structural impacts. Finally, exploring teacher perspectives on implementing these student-derived innovations would enrich the understanding of sustainable change in internationalized writing curricula.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study has illuminated critical insight for transnational writing pedagogy: when the instructor is not enough, structural design matters just as much. In a U.S.-accredited first-year composition course at a Sino-American university, Chinese first-year students demonstrated strong writing self-efficacy and self-directed learning; however, moderate course enjoyment revealed a persistent gap attributable not to instructor shortcomings but to institutional mediational tools, prolonged class sessions, clustered deadlines, unclear assessment criteria, and inflexible grouping.

Drawing on sociocultural theory (Allami et al., 2025; Fu & Liu, 2025; Vygotsky, 1978), the findings underscore that writing development is irreducibly distributed across interpersonal scaffolding and curricular artifacts. The process approach, while effectively enacted through instructor feedback and peer collaboration, reaches its full potential only when supported by thoughtful structural design (T. Huang, 2025; Wang & Ganapathy, 2025). Students' vivid accounts of the transformation from anxious novices to confident, process-oriented writers affirm the efficacy of iterative drafting and dialogic revision but also highlight how fatigue and cognitive overload from prolonged sessions or rushed deadlines can undermine these gains (Cheng & Xu, 2025; Pearson, 2024). By centering on student voice, a perspective still underrepresented in transnational curriculum development (Tuhkala et al., 2021), this study offers transferable innovations: shorter sessions with active breaks, staggered deadlines, coconstructed rubrics, hybrid grouping strategies, and continued cultivation of the low-pressure family context that nurtures self-directed learning (Hang & Zhang, 2025; Shen & Bai, 2024). These recommendations extend beyond Sino-foreign contexts to any intensive writing program seeking to bridge high competence with sustained engagement.

Ultimately, the equivalence of the two pillars challenges educators and administrators in adopting a holistic activity-system perspective: excellent teaching must be complemented by deliberate structural redesign. In an era of expanding transnational and internationalized higher education, systematically listening to student perceptions is not merely inclusive; it is essential to create learning environments where all learners, particularly those navigating cultural and pedagogical borderlands, can thrive as confident academic writers. Future research should build on these student-generated insights by using longitudinal designs and incorporating teacher perspectives to trace the long-term impact of such innovations on writing development and retention in globalized curricula.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Owing to ethical considerations regarding participant anonymity, the data are not publicly archived.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board. The study complied with all relevant ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants gave informed consent for audio and video recordings after the researcher thoroughly explained the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. Anonymity was maintained, and all the data were used exclusively for research purposes.

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