
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Self-regulated Writing: Strategies and Mediators for Chinese Students in UK

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| ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the specific self-regulated writing (SRW) strategies and their mediating factors among high-achieving Chinese international students in UK higher education contexts, a group that constitutes one of the largest international student populations yet remains largely underexplored in SRW research. Guided by an integrated theoretical framework of social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory, the study adopted semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis with six participants. Results identified three core SRW strategies: outline-making and planning with self-created files, logic-prioritized self-proofreading, and individualized motivational regulation including self-talk, meditation, and self-consequencing. Further analysis revealed that SRW practice is dynamically shaped by the interaction of two categories of factors: sociocultural contextual factors (including feedback quality, in-class writing guidance, and adaptation to UK academic norms) and personal cognitive factors (including self-efficacy and motivational beliefs, with task utility and topic interest emerging as key motivational drivers). The findings verify the integrated theoretical framework's explanatory power in cross-cultural settings, address the research gap in qualitative investigations of high-achieving Chinese learners' SRW processes, and further provide targeted pedagogical implications.

| KEYWORDS

higher education; cross-cultural academic adaptation; L2 academic writing; self-regulated writing process; teacher support; self-efficacy; motivational beliefs

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Self-regulated writing (SRW) is a key determinant of L2 academic writing competence (Teng, 2022), especially for Chinese international students in cross-cultural learning contexts, adapting to Western higher education contexts. Effective SRW strategy use enables learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their writing process independently, and the dynamic use of these strategies is jointly shaped by contextual and personal factors (Al-Dawood, 2022; Bai, et al., 2021; Chen, et al., 2023; Teng, 2024). Previous studies have confirmed the positive effect of SRW on L2 writing performance and identified multiple factors mediating strategy use (Abdelhalim, 2022; Al-Dawood, 2022; Teng, 2022), yet most adopted quantitative approaches to compare the use of SRW strategies across different learner levels. Few qualitative interview studies have explored both the specific SRW strategies and their underlying influencing factors of high-achieving Chinese learners in UK academic settings, and the interactive mechanism of contextual and individual factors shaping their SRW practice remains underexplored, while Chinese international students are one of the largest groups in UK higher education, thus making their cross-cultural academic writing adaptation a pressing focus.

This study is guided by social cognitive theory and sociocultural theory, which provide a dual theoretical framework for exploring the dynamic SRW strategic use and its influencing factors in cross-cultural academic contexts.

Based on the above research gap and theoretical framework, this qualitative study adopted semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to investigate the strategic use of SRW among high-achieving Chinese international students in UK universities.

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Specifically, two research questions were addressed: 1) What specific SRW strategies do these learners adopt in English academic writing? 2) What factors influence their SRW strategy use? The findings provide empirical evidence and pedagogical implications for researchers, educators, and higher education institutions interested in L2 academic writing instruction and academic training for Chinese international students.

2. Literature review

2.1 Self-regulated Writing

Self-regulated learning (SRL) was proposed by Zimmerman (1986) based on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes triadic reciprocal determinism of behavioural, personal, and environmental factors. SRL refers to learners' active metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural participation in learning, and SRL strategies are robust predictors of L2 skill success across contexts (Teng & Zhang, 2016; Teng, 2022; Zimmerman, 1989; 2000).

In recent years, researchers have applied the SRL mechanism to writing, defining SRW as a self-planned, self-initiated, and self-sustained process involving self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions to attain writing goals, mediated by cognitive, psychological, and social factors (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Zimmerman and Risemberg's (1997) SRW model, rooted in the 1989 triadic model, outlines three interrelated regulation types: covert regulation, behavioural regulation, and environmental regulation, distinguishing itself by emphasizing dynamic feedback loops (Zimmerman, 2000). Covert self-regulation involves monitoring cognitive and emotional states, such as goal-setting, planning, self-talk, persuasion and feedback-handling.

Behavioural self-regulation refers to self-monitoring, self-consequencing, and self-verbalization, which are related to strategies such as self-proofreading and the establishment of reward and punishment measures. Environmental self-regulation refers to structuring an effective writing environment, such as choosing a quiet workplace, using available resources and imitating sample assignments.

Subsequently, Zimmerman's (2000) cyclical phase model (forethought, performance, self-reflection) elaborated the structural sustainability of self-regulation, while Zimmerman and Risemberg's (1997) model remains more aligned with writing-specific research (Zhang & Dong, 2022) due to its focus on personal-environmental interactions (Adkins, 2005; Teng, 2022). However, its limited attention to cultural factors and the growing recognition of self-regulation's cultural embeddedness necessitate supplementation with sociocultural theory (Teng, 2022; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

Sociocultural theory highlights contextual mediation (Yang, 2022), stressing that knowledge acquisition stems from social interaction and illuminating how contextual factors shape learners' SRW efforts (Hu & Gao, 2018; Lei, 2016). Enlightened by Engeström's (1999) activity system from the sociocultural perspective, Hu and Gao (2017) proposed a self-regulated learning activity system model to help widen the understanding of the SRL process, which shows that mediating artefacts (such as culture and teaching materials), rules (such as genre and time), community (such as teachers and peers), and division of labour (such as power relationship) intertwine and affect the learners in the sociocultural context as well as their learning outcomes.

To address contextual factors in the research questions and align with the study's overall aims, this study integrates both theoretical perspectives: it takes Zimmerman and Risemberg's (1997) model from social cognitive theory as the core and complements it with Hu and Gao's (2017) self-regulated learning activity system model from sociocultural frameworks.

2.2 High-proficiency Writers' SRW Strategies Used in the Academic Writing Process

Though few studies limited the scope to the academic writing process, previous studies compared the detailed SRW strategies of L2 writers of different levels. Their results show the complex relationship between strategy use and achievement, and confirm the important role of SRW strategies in achievement (Teng & Huang, 2019; Umamah & Cahyono, 2020).

For covert regulation, proficient writers value the discussion of ideas and invest substantial pre-writing time in global-local planning (Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). They set both extrinsic and intrinsic goals to sustain motivation (Abdelhalim, 2022; Teng et al., 2019; 2020). Besides, they monitor their writing against marking criteria and engage in revision frequently throughout the writing process, prioritizing logical and structural revision over surface-level errors (Mallahi, 2024). However, some studies identified only utility as a factor influencing self-regulated progress, while other research also highlighted the role of interest. (Bai et al., 2021; Teng et al., 2019).

For behavioural regulation, proficient writers excel at emotional and motivational control through self-talk, self-consequencing, interest enhancement, and emotional management (Teng et al., 2020; Zhang & Dong, 2022). They demonstrate flexible strategy

adaptation based on self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, actively control their emotions and inspire their writing motivation (Teng et al., 2020).

For environmental regulation, proficient writers utilize available resources, such as course materials and sample assignments (Hu et al., 2018), and often seek peer and instructor feedback for revision (Marcelo & Yot-Domínguez, 2017; Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). However, some studies note their tendency towards independence, with limited help-seeking, indicating an area requiring further investigation (Abdelhalim, 2022).

Previous studies on high-proficiency writers' SRW strategies have yielded mixed findings. Quantitative studies note that they may use a wider range of strategies (Bai, 2018; Teng et al., 2020), while some researchers argue that it is the quality of strategy use that matters (Chen et al., 2023; Mallahi, 2024). This ambiguity highlights the limitations of quantitative methods in demonstrating a comprehensive image of the dynamic nature of SRW processes and the mediating factors behind them, prompting calls for qualitative methods to obtain a richer description and a deeper understanding of the SRW process in writing tasks (Abdelhalim, 2022; Teng et al., 2020; Teng, 2022). Besides, adopting interviews can help uncover individuals' perspectives on particular events in particular contexts, and therefore providing a chance to learn how various types of knowledge and beliefs of different individuals can shape the unique writing process (Teng, 2022).

2.3 Factors that mediate the Use of SRW strategies

SRL models and empirical research confirm that SRW strategy deployment, monitoring, and adjustment are shaped by multiple factors (Teng, 2022). Aligning with Zimmerman and Risemberg's (1997) model, successful writing relies on intentional strategy control and supportive personal and contextual factors (Bai et al., 2021; Teng, 2020).

Self-efficacy refers to learners' confidence in completing a given task (Bandura, 1991). Its mediated role in the self-regulation process has attracted many researchers and it is considered to play a central role in individuals' learning agency (Teng, 2022). The results of Teng et al. (2020) show that self-efficacy affects the use of motivation-regulation strategies. Teng (2024) found that self-efficacy strongly predicts goal-oriented monitoring. In fact, many studies concluded that self-efficacy has a positive impact on the use of general self-regulated strategies (Bai et al., 2021; Teng et al., 2018). However, Teng (2024) and Lee et al. (2021) noted that it does not predict social strategy use, highlighting the need for further inquiry.

Motivational beliefs include growth mindset, task value (interest and utility), expectancy, test anxiety, and goal orientation, which have been widely identified as important factors that mediate strategy use (Bai et al., 2021; Teng, 2024). For example, Teng (2024) found that task value and intrinsic goal orientation predicted nine SRL strategy subcategories, while test anxiety negatively impacts feedback-handling and emotional control. Some researchers found that in Confucian cultural contexts, self-efficacy and growth mindset are stronger predictors than interest and utility (Bai et al., 2021). In fact, culture is considered an important influential factor in motivation-related research, as discrepancies exist in the learning beliefs and values between people from Asian and Western cultures, which may lead to the complex interaction between motivational variables and SRW strategy use (Bai et al., 2021). However, most prior SRW research has focused on home-country learners, leaving cross-cultural influences largely understudied.

According to the self-regulated learning activity system (Hu et al., 2017), many contextual factors can also influence the self-regulated process. Teacher and peer feedback acts as a catalyst for self-regulation (Al-Dawood, 2022). Effective feedback includes "feed back, feed forward, and feed up" information (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), which refers to clarifying criteria, progress, and improvement methods. Effective feedback enhances motivation, self-efficacy, and strategy use as well as improves SRL abilities and final achievement (Al-Dawood, 2022; Teng, 2021), but ineffective feedback may negatively influence learners' self-efficacy and motivational beliefs, and in turn affect the use of feedback-handling strategy (Al-Dawood, 2022).

Social values and personal experiences have been found to intertwine and influence the use of self-regulated strategies (Qian, 2020; Soden, 2013; Zhang, 2020), which are reflected in the rules and division of labour outlined in the model of Hu et al. (2017). As for the division of labour, compared to students who grew up studying in the UK, Chinese students are accustomed to a larger power distance from their teachers and therefore reported reluctance to communicate with professors (Qian, 2020). Considering the aspect of rules, previous studies compared the academic values in China and the UK and concluded that Chinese academic values are deeply rooted in Confucian heritage culture, which stresses the respect for authority and group harmony, while UK academic values emphasize critical thinking (Ahmed, 2020). Though proficient learners tend to stress following the marking scheme in their SRW process (Gao et al., 2015), these discrepancies in academic values may cause maladjustment in overseas students' self-efficacy (Soden, 2013), thus negatively impact SRW strategy use (Teng, 2021), yet few studies have explore on this issue, thereby highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Notably, most research on the interaction between personal and contextual factors has adopted quantitative designs (Teng, 2021), while qualitative methods could offer more nuanced insights into these context-specific dynamics (Butler, 2002).

3. Method

With the belief that individuals' experiences and perceptions regarding their SRW strategies are diverse and nuanced, this research aims to understand the individual experiences and the subjective meaning they attached to their SRW process.

Eight high-achieving Chinese international learners were purposively selected from a UK university's postgraduate programme based on their average academic writing scores. Before establishing the criterion of high-proficiency academic writers, professors from the university who can provide insights into scholastic attainment within this context were consulted, and the criteria of high-proficiency academic writers were defined as an average essay score of over 60 for students. Demographic information for the six participants involved in formal interviews (coded P1 to P6 for privacy) is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Participants' demographics

Participants	Age	Major for master's degree	Duration of study in the UK	Average score of essays
P1	24	Language education	1 year	62.3
P2	24	Tesol	1 year	60.2
P3	24	Social anthropology	1 year	72.45
P4	24	Language education	1 year	64.3
P5	23	Tesol	1 year	64.8
P6	23	Tesol	1 year	65.8

Adopting a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' SRW experiences. Two pilot interviews refined the questions. Formal interviews lasted for 45–60 minutes each and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and are verbatim transcribed into English as primary data.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. First, open coding was conducted on the transcripts to identify initial concepts. Second, similar concepts were categorized into codes, and the coding results were repeatedly reviewed and refined to avoid research bias. Third, the final core themes were confirmed to ensure they accurately reflected participants' actual statements. Finally, the themes were linked to the research questions, depicted and explained with quotations, examples, and literature to interpret the findings. An example of the coding process is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: An example of coding

Theme	2ed coding	1st coding	Response from interviewee
use motivational-regulation strategies	Self-consequencing	Set travel plans as rewards	"... I motivate myself. Every time when I finish my thesis, I will go out to travel. Without travel plans, I wouldn't have the motivation to write because I feel like I keep procrastinating." (P6)

Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was signed by participants, who were informed of the research purposes, data usage, privacy protection, and the right to voluntary withdrawal. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, transcripts were cross-checked with original recordings, and participants were invited to validate extracted core themes.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and interprets key findings on SRW strategies and their influencing factors, with a focus on factors that inform pedagogical implications.

4.1 The Use of SRW Strategies

Participants reported three main types of SRW strategies: outline-making and planning with self-created files, self-proofreading, and motivational-regulation.

For planning, all participants used self-created files to build writing frameworks, spending considerable time on this stage as they recognized its crucial role in achieving satisfying outcomes (P6: “If you start with the wrong framework, it can be very difficult later on. Whether you want to revise or overturn what you originally wrote ... is a huge blow both practically and psychologically”). This result aligns with many previous findings that high-proficiency writers tend to well plan their work before beginning writing (Hu et al., 2018; Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). Awareness of the importance of outlining benefits their academic writing outcomes as topic development is the strongest factor of good academic writing and it shapes the quantity and quality of writing (Kaufhold, 2025; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

All interviewees devoted substantial time to self-proofreading, consistent with prior comparisons of writing strategies across proficiency levels (Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). They prioritized logical coherence and structural integrity over linguistic issues, which also lends support to previous knowledge (Mallahi, 2024; Umamah & Cahyono, 2020), as exemplified by P4’s focus on “whether the literature I cite or what I write in supports my argument. And whether it has anything to do with what’s written before and what’s written after” (P4). Linguistic errors were addressed post logical-structural proofreading via online grammar checkers, which reduced cognitive load (Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). A key divergence from prior research is that, unlike high-proficiency writers who sought teacher/peer feedback (Umamah & Cahyono, 2020), this study’s participants acted independently.

All participants used motivational-regulation strategies to maintain focus and sustain their effort in academic writing, with individual preferences for specific approaches. Three primary strategies were reported, including self-consequencing, self-talk, interest enhancement, and emotional control, which are consistent with prior findings (Teng et al., 2020; Teng, 2021; Zhang & Dong, 2022). For example, P5 prefers self-talk. She keeps talking to herself, for example, “...you will not fail at your level ... just keep writing ...” (P5) to encourage herself to stay focused and insist on writing. While P3 prefers emotional control through meditation, she reports that “... meditation... a good way for me ...”. P6 uses self-consequencing by setting travelling as a reward for herself because she knows that she “... without travel plans, I wouldn’t have the motivation to write”. The responses from the participants show that they adopted strategies based on self-awareness, which enhanced the effectiveness of their motivational regulation. This result reveals that the participants successfully enact the feedback loop of SRL (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997), in which they keep monitoring their previous self-regulation process to be cognizant of their own characteristics and to adapt strategy use, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of SRW, corresponding to the previous finding that high-proficiency writers show higher flexibility and maturity in SRW (Teng et al., 2020). However, four participants reported only a pass-focused goal, unlike existing research findings which indicated that high-proficiency writers set extrinsic goals such as achieving higher scores or outperforming peers to help sustain their efforts (Teng et al., 2019; Teng et al., 2020).

All three strategies are voluntary personal behaviors, demonstrating participants’ active engagement in academic writing adaptation in UK contexts, echoing previous studies on high-proficiency writers’ strategy use. Notable differences from prior research include participants’ pass-focused goal-setting and limited help-seeking from peers or professors, addressed in the subsequent factor analysis section.

4.2 Contextual Factors Mediating SRW Strategy Use

4.2.1 Support from Instructors and Markers

Two key aspects of teacher/marker support emerged as influential: feedback quality and writing guidance.

Although interviewees P1 and P3 held a positive attitude towards the feedback received from the previous course work, other participants admitted that they had a negative view of the feedback they received and seldom applied it, which corresponds to previous studies (Al-Dawood, 2022; Schillings et al., 2023). For example, P1 believed that “feedback from professors are useful”, while P6 reported “very often the feedback I received is a general comment ... I don’t know how to improve ...”. An important factor being mentioned that directly impact the participants’ feedback-handling is the perceived usefulness of the feedback they got, which is consistent with Al-Dawood’s findings (2022).

Ineffective feedback was characterized by being general, vague, or overly encouraging without constructive direction. For example, P6 indicated her helpless feeling when she gets general, useless feedback from markers: “Most of the feedback I received didn’t provide specific details ... After I read it, I ... was confused, and I didn’t understand how the marker wanted me to improve. (So) there’s nothing I can do to adjust”. P2 expressed the same view and provided an example: “... ‘your critical thinking can be improved’ ... I ... want to adjust ... but I don’t know ... I didn’t have a chance to ask (the marker for more explanation). (Because) I didn’t know who graded my assignment”. And P5 reported that some feedback “... only pointed out what I did well ... so I feel it unhelpful.”

For feedback deemed useful by the participants, key identified characteristics included being direct, detailed, margin-specific, and aligned with clarified marking schemes. For instance, P2 stated that “... it may directly point out where I have problems, and I will adjust ...”. P6 reported that she prefers feedback that is made directly in the margin of the essay as it is “... very clear. ... also convenient for the markers as they don’t have to say which paragraph or sentence (when they are writing a summary after reading the essay).” She also reported that feedback “... evaluate (the essay) with different modules ...is good. ... I can know what is my weakness” (P6). The “different modules” mentioned here, according to her clarification, refer to the general marking scheme provided by the university, and the response from the participants indicates that they subsequently focused more on the aspects that were identified by the markers as their weaknesses.

Participants’ reported characteristics of useful and useless feedback support Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) theory about effective feedback. Most participants noted that course instructors delivered special lectures to answer assignment-related questions, facilitating a smoother start to essay writing. They praised in-class sample assignment presentations and analyses in Q&A sessions, as these helped with “... better understand the requirement and expectation” (P1) and shaped their writing process, indicating that such practices effectively delivered feedback information and prepared learners to interpret markers’ written feedback information and feed-up information. However, participants, like P6, believed “every teacher has a different grading preferences”, a common challenge for international students (Soden, 2013) and a key reason some participants set no goals beyond a pass.

Aforementioned responses suggest that markers mostly provided feed-forward information (e.g., P6: “evaluate with different modules”; P2: “directly point out where I have problems”). Notably, participants viewed detailed marginal comments as more useful than general summaries, as participants required assignment-specific examples to understand markers’ evaluations. This also enabled easier consultation with other instructors for improvements, given the anonymous marking context of the study.

However, feedback on information (i.e., how to deal with identity issues) was consistently lacking in participants’ feedback, leaving them unsure how to revise despite identifying their weaknesses. This gap, compounded by inconsistent grading preferences across teachers and an anonymous marking process, hindered effective feedback-handling. These findings thus highlight that while in-class writing guidance was valued by participants, marker feedback practices require further refinement to better support students’ self-regulated academic writing.

4.2.2 Sociocultural Factors

Sociocultural differences between the UK and China significantly influenced strategy use, particularly in goal-setting and social strategy adoption.

Participants, except for P3 and P4 set no performance goals higher than passing, contradicting existing findings on high-proficiency learners’ performance goal-setting, especially for proficient Chinese learners who are deeply affected by exam-oriented education (Chen et al., 2023; Cheong, 2023). All four participants reported low self-efficacy, whereas the two who set specific performance goals demonstrated relatively high self-efficacy. Therefore, this phenomenon may relate to participants’ self-efficacy in this specific context. As noted earlier, self-efficacy is the central factor in self-regulated mechanism and has been identified as having a direct, significant influence on goal systems (Teng, 2022), while previous studies have found that Chinese students who study in the UK encountered challenges because of the discrepancy between academic writing expectancy in China and the UK (Tian & Low, 2012) such as languages barrier (Wu, 2015), academic writing convention (James et al., 2019), and perspective on critical thinking (Ahmed, 2020), which stems not only from UK academic writing requirement but also from their previous experiences in China (Tian & Low, 2012). This is indicated in participants’ response. For example, P6 believed that “We don’t have these in the Chinese educational environment, so we don’t know how it should be ... we therefore are very confused.”

Prior studies have examined the root causes of this challenge. While UK essay writing prioritizes argumentation, Chinese students are accustomed to narrative styles shaped by traditional collectivist values (Tian & Low, 2012; Soden, 2013). Furthermore, UK academic writing emphasizes reliable evidence from previous literature as support of ideas, and academic conduct is seriously treated, differing notably from the situation in China (Soden, 2013). It is therefore reasonable that they experienced a sense of challenge, which in turn led to relatively low self-efficacy, a crucial factor affecting goal-setting (Chen, 2020; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Consistent with participant responses, learners with low self-efficacy tend to attribute performance to external factors such as luck (Teng, 2024), which explains why these high-proficiency writers only set pass-level performance goals. This can also be viewed as a self-regulatory strategy for mediating writing anxiety (Teng, 2021; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997), supported by Zhang et al. (2022), who found that performance-oriented motivational regulation (e.g.,

setting high self-requirements) is a strong predictor of writing anxiety, unlike enjoyment-enhancing strategies such as self-talk and emotional regulation.

Additionally, participants' limited understanding of academic misconduct led to their infrequent use of social strategies such as communicating with or seeking help from lecturers or peers. Four participants reported avoiding essay-related discussions with lecturers and peers for fear of academic misconduct, e.g., "I don't discuss these things with my classmates ... because I think that if I discuss with classmates and get the same result, it may lead to academic misconduct." (P5) This reflects their unfamiliarity with the specific acts that constitute academic misconduct, a result of divergent academic requirements between the UK and China, which has led them to avoid all assignment-related discussions to prevent possible academic misconduct. While academic misconduct risks apply to all students, international students are found to be especially disadvantaged (Parnter, 2022), especially international students of Asian heritage, who are from a collectivist society and study abroad in a more individualistic culture (Ahmed, 2020). This finding conforms to the SRL activity system model of Hu et al. (2017), believing that learners' use of strategies is closely tied to their understanding of rules of the target learning context. However, former research has shown that communication with teachers and peers facilitates SRL and improves writing quality (Umamah & Cahyono, 2020). These findings thus underscore the importance of supporting international students' adaptation to UK academic norms for effective SRW practice.

4.3 Personal Factors Mediating SRW Strategy Use

4.3.1 Self-Efficacy

One notable finding of the present research is that self-efficacy emerged as a core but inconsistently perceived factor shaping participants' SRW processes. Every participant directly or indirectly reflected its impact on their whole SRW process, verifying its central position in Zimmerman and Risemberg's (1997) SRW model and existing empirical findings (Bai et al., 2021; Zhu & Sun, 2025). However, two participants claimed self-efficacy had little or even no influence on their writing. For example, P4 commented that "It (self-efficacy) doesn't really matter, because it all feels the same when you start to write", despite her contradictory remarks: "... the first edition is always rubbish ... so I will spend a lot of time revising it" revealing its effect and indicating that her low self-efficacy in her first draft urged the use of revising-related strategies to improve the quality of her writing, which in turn boosted personal self-efficacy and promoted the use of self-regulated strategies (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

This inconsistency may stem from two key factors. First, self-efficacy's effects are less pronounced among high-proficiency writers (Stewart et al., 2015), as these mature learners better regulate negative emotions from low self-efficacy, thereby mitigating its adverse impact on the self-regulation process. Second, the study did not define clear dimensions of self-efficacy (linguistic, self-regulatory, and performance dimensions), while different dimensions relate differently to SRW strategy use (Teng, 2024), which may lend support to the view that self-efficacy is not a general trait but a set of domain-specific beliefs, suggesting future research may further explore this issue.

4.3.2 Motivational Beliefs

The responses from participants show that their motivational beliefs have a direct impact on their use of SRW strategies, which aligns with existing research (Bai et al., 2021; Teng, 2024). Specifically, interest and utility are stressed as key influential factors.

All participants emphasized task utility, driven by graduation requirements and deadline pressure. For instance, P1 said that she is "... afraid of fail and unable to graduate... stare at the deadline ... set how many words I must write every day". The same situation was reported by all other participants. Participants in the present research also highlighted interest as a key motivator. They purposefully selected topics that they are interested in, since they recognized that interest is a key driver in their SRW process. For example, P3 reported that she tended to choose a topic that she is interested in because she "... need some psychological support to keep me going".

These findings are partially consistent with Bai et al. (2021), which identified only perceived task utility as an influencer of Chinese learners' self-regulated process. Previous studies noted that Chinese education, rooted in traditional Confucian culture, tends to prioritize practical learning outcomes and downplay intrinsic interest, unlike Western cultures that emphasize learning enjoyment (Wang et al., 2019). For the participants, this cultural background explains their strong focus on task utility, as they viewed academic writing as a means to achieve graduation. However, the UK academic context's flexibility (allowing topic choice) enabled their intrinsic interest to emerge as a complementary motivator, a dynamic not observed in constrained Chinese classroom settings (Bai et al., 2021).

The participants' dual emphasis on both task utility and intrinsic interest reflects the combined effects of deep-seated cultural influences and the unique characteristics of the cross-cultural academic context. This interaction between cultural values and contextual flexibility highlights the role of individual motivational profiles in shaping strategic adaptation to cross-cultural academic writing demands and further underscores the value of flexible topic choice for fostering learners' self-regulatory behaviors in the academic writing process.

4.4 Application of Findings

Based on the identified key SRW strategies and the mediating factors of the SRW process in this specific cross-cultural context, this section suggests some applications for related agencies.

For researchers, this study highlights the value of integrating sociocognitive and sociocultural perspectives to examine the interplay between personal and contextual factors in context-specific SRW research. Given the contextual dependence of self-regulation (Teng et al., 2018), further investigations into diverse educational contexts are recommended to inform targeted SRW strategy instruction.

For educators and institutions, several key measures are advised. First, cross-cultural collaborations to address differences in academic norms and their impact on self-efficacy are recommended, as well as providing targeted pre-departure training and academic writing support programs. Educators working in similar contexts are recommended to clarify the details of academic misconduct in the target learning environment for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly by clarifying the differences in how such misconduct is understood across the two cultures. For instance, higher education instructors can provide examples of the forms of peer discussion that do and do not constitute academic misconduct. Second, in terms of curriculum design, providing topic choice flexibility can sustain intrinsic motivation (Teng et al., 2020), while standardizing feedback to include "feed back, feed forward, and feed up" components (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) ensures usability, especially under anonymous marking. Finally, in terms of teacher training programs, effective feedback provision as well as guiding students on feedback utilization should be emphasized.

5. Conclusion

This study's exploration of self-regulated writing (SRW) among Chinese international postgraduate students in UK higher education contexts offers nuanced insights into cross-cultural academic adaptation. The identified core SRW strategies and the dynamic interplay between sociocultural factors and personal cognitive factors highlight that SRW practice is not a universal construct but a contextually embedded process, shaped by unique tensions between academic norms, cultural backgrounds, and individual cognitive traits.

The verification of the integrated sociocultural and social cognitive theoretical framework underscores its utility for unpacking cross-cultural SRW dynamics, providing a theoretical lens for future research into international students' academic learning. The diverse adaptive characteristics of this group reflect the pragmatic coping mechanisms they employed to navigate unfamiliar academic environments, shedding light on the hidden challenges of cross-cultural academic integration beyond linguistic barriers and offering meaningful implications for bridging theory and practice in international higher education. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and reliance on interview data, which limits generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed methods or larger samples to validate these findings across diverse UK academic contexts.

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