

“I Can’t Argue Back”: Barriers to Rebuttal Writing Among Chinese EFL

Learners

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Abstract

This study explores barriers to effective rebuttals in second language (L2) writing among Chinese EFL learners, examining their rebuttal performance, self-perceived reasons for poor performance, and links to class emotions. It involved 136 English-major sophomores from a Southeast China university, who received four-week rebuttal instruction integrated with critical thinking training via an “infusion” approach. Data were collected from TEM4 (a high-stakes test for Chinese English majors) prompt-based writing, open-ended questions on self-perceived reasons, and an emotion questionnaire measuring three positive emotions and five negative ones. Results showed 70.59% of participants either submitted ineffective rebuttals or failed to provide any rebuttals; key reasons included habit-related factors, competence-related factors, and idea-conflict factors. Participants reported more positive than negative emotions in rebuttal-writing classes, but emotions in rebuttal-writing classes had no significant correlation with their rebuttal performance. Through unprecedentedly uncovering the multiple reasons for ineffective and non-existent rebuttal writing and excluding emotional experience in rebuttal-writing classes as a reason, the study provides implications for L2 writing and critical thinking instruction.

Keywords: rebuttal, barrier, critical thinking, emotion, L2 writing

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is crucial for college instruction, academic performance, and daily life (Tsui, 2002; Bezanilla et al., 2019; Wu, 2023), yet an absence of research on the specifics of

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how to instruct critical thinking is noted (Li & Liu, 2020) and its instruction in Chinese L2 classrooms remains underdeveloped (Huang, 2019). Many researchers believe that the development of critical thinking poses a greater challenge for eastern students than for their western counterparts (Cherkasov et al., 2019).

There is a close relationship between critical thinking and written argumentation (Andrews, 2015), with the latter being one of the most effective ways to cultivate the former (Bezanilla et al., 2019). Therefore, rebuttal writing instruction is supposedly conducive to critical thinking. Yet, previous research has primarily focused on claims and evidence, while neglecting other more sophisticated elements like rebuttals, which can actually increase the persuasiveness of argumentative essays (Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Paek & Kang, 2017). This neglect is detrimental to the instruction of argumentative writing and the development of critical thinking.

Rebuttal writing, an epitome of critical thinking, requires students to analyze, evaluate, and judge ideas presented in writing prompts. “Counterarguing among students at all levels is an area of weakness” (Liu & Stapleton, 2020, p.11); it is highly probable that rebuttals are also the case, the causes of which have not been clarified. A potential cause could be hypothesized to be emotion-related, since different domains arouse different emotions (Goetz et al., 2006).

Confucianism’s emphasis on “Ren” (benevolence, which embodies empathetic care for others) and “Li” (ritual propriety, which undergirds harmony and order) has profoundly shaped how the Chinese people understand interpersonal relationships and pursue social order. However, evaluating and judging ideas and potential rebuttals involve identifying problems with others’ ideas, challenging others, and souring the social atmosphere (Du & Gao, 2024).

Therefore, such an action may elicit negative emotions of L2 learners, probably hindering them from noting others' refutable ideas, although this has been untested.

The present study therefore aims to acquire an understanding of L2 learners' rebuttal writing performance, their self-perceived reasons for their performance, and to explore whether there are class-emotion-related reasons.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rebuttal Writing

In examining the various perspectives on critical thinking, nearly all critical thinking definitions centre on evaluation (Ennis, 1996; Facione, 1990; Gokhale, 1995), requiring critical thinkers to analyze others' ideas, assess evidence, and reflect on perspectives (Paul et al., 1990), skills essential for rebuttal writing. Dispositionally, they should be adept at independent thinking, considerate of diverse ideas, cautious in making judgments, and willing to modify perspectives upon reflection (Paul et al., 1990). These critical thinking skills and dispositional traits are greatly demanded in rebuttal writing.

Dealing with refutable ideas pertains to counterarguments and rebuttals, with the latter addressing the former and their supporting evidence (Liu & Stapleton, 2020; Shi, 2024). They are two of the five essential skills of "the most comprehensive conception" (Jonassen & Kim, 2010, p. 441) of argumentation and should be included in a compelling argument (Kuhn, 2008). They are also closely related to the six structural components of Toulmin's argumentation model (van Eemeren et al., 1996).

A large number of studies have demonstrated that when students engage in argumentation, whether in their first or second language, they tend to emphasize the

establishment of their own viewpoint and the justification of its validity, rather than acknowledging the existence of alternative viewpoints, evaluating their reasonableness, and identifying their problems (Liu & Stapleton, 2020; Perkins et al., 1991; Stein & Bernas, 1999). Counterarguments are “the most common weaknesses in argumentation.” (Jonassen & Kim, 2010, p.442); students frequently overlook counterarguments (Shi, 2024). Given the connection between counterarguments and rebuttals, the same holds true for the latter.

The reasons for the disregard have not been extensively investigated. The research of Liu and Stapleton (2020) revealed that despite intervention for 12 lessons, more than a quarter of elementary school students still failed to include opposing ideas and rebuttals on post- and delayed post-tests. They have assumed some reasons like insufficient English proficiency, which need further justification to benefit L2 writing instruction and students’ critical thinking.

2.2 Emotions and Rebuttal Writing

According to Dewaele & Li (2020), “There is no agreement on the nature or definition of ‘emotion’” (p.15). It is a comparatively intense, transient, and ever-changing experience that is strongly related to, shaped by, and interacts with particular objects or social settings (Bieg et al., 2022; Gallucci, 2013; Gray & Watson, 2001).

Emotions are classified as either positive or negative by valence (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017) and as either activating or deactivating by activation (Fredrickson, 2001; Goetz et al., 2006; Reindl et al., 2018). In L2 learning, both positive and negative emotions, as well as activating and deactivating emotions, coexist and interact. Their functions are “broadening” or “narrowing” according to the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001).

Positive activating emotions like enjoyment can offer “momentary thought-action

repertoire” (Fredrickson, 2004, p.150). They help learners develop a broader mindset for engaging with new learning tasks (Dewaele & MacFarlane, 2014; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2021), optimize resource use, realize their potentials (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), make effective self-regulation (Pekrun, 2006), and persevere through challenges (Dewaele et al., 2016). They are causally related to favourable academic outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). As for negative activating emotions like anger, regardless of their differing effects on students’ learning (Turner & Schallert, 2001), their negative effects prevail (Pekrun, 2006). However, negative deactivating emotions like boredom and hopelessness are assumed to definitely impair motivation and information-processing, thus relating to lower academic achievement (Pekrun et al., 2011; Reindl et al., 2018) due to their draining nature, while positive deactivating emotions like relief and relaxation do not necessarily exert positive or negative effect (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2011).

Acquisition of the forms and modes of thought of a language, as well as the process of acquiring a language in a particular social context, can elicit a variety of emotions, known as achievement emotions (Goetz et al., 2003). Achievement emotions are linked directly to achievement activities or achievement outcomes and can be triggered by people and environment in a variety of academic contexts (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2011). The domain specificity of emotions has been corroborated and various emotions experienced in different disciplines have been studied (Goetz et al., 2006). De Smet et al. (2018) and Dewaele et al. (2016) have observed that anxiety and enjoyment in L2 classrooms manifest differently across learners, L2s, and situations.

Conceptions of individuality and self-expression, two cultural presuppositions of

western definitions of critical thinking, demonstrate that these definitions may not be as well accepted in other cultures (Atkinson, 1997), including Chinese culture, which values social harmony, hierarchy, and reservedness (Che, 2002). Chinese officials have constantly emphasized the need of maintaining social concord (Wan et al., 2022) and behaviours such as saving face and giving face to others are widely accepted (Jia, 1998; Zhan, 2021). Given the considerable emphasis on harmony, asking Chinese L2 writing learners to generate opposing viewpoints can be challenging to themselves and face-threatening to others. Rebuttal writing is likely to arouse specific emotions of Chinese L2 learners.

To sum up, in order to better cultivate critical thinking, the study examines L2 writing learners' rebuttal performance and their self-perceived reasons for their possible ineffective and non-existent rebuttals, with an eye on a potential emotional reason for the deficiency. It attempts to respond to the following three questions:

RQ1: Do Chinese EFL learners perform well in rebuttal writing?

RQ2: If their performance is inadequate, what are L2 writing learners' self-perceived reasons for their ineffective and non-existent rebuttals?

RQ3: Are the reasons related to the emotions experienced by L2 writing learners when they take rebuttal-writing classes?

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

In the course English Writing 3 in which the research was conducted, critical thinking was taught using an "infusion" approach (Ennis, 1989) based on Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking model, i.e. critical thinking training was integrated into the instruction of L2

writing. Students were informed that the principles of critical thinking were being taught throughout the course. To develop their critical thinking skills, questions identified by Clase and Bonk (1990, as cited in Duron et al., 2006) as having the most significant influence were frequently posed to students. Additionally, self-assessment, peer feedback, and instructor feedback—a “fundamental methodological element” (Bezanilla et al., 2019, p.3) to develop critical thinking, —were conducted regularly every two to three weeks. According to Zhang et al. (2022), the embedded critical thinking module can have a greater statistically significant positive effect on the development of critical thinking of college students than an independent critical thinking course.

3.2 Participants

The participants were English majors aged 19 to 21 from six intact sophomore classes in a university in Southeast China. All of them were born and have been brought up in China and they have learned English for 9 to 12 years. They have achieved a basic to intermediate level of English proficiency. They learned rebuttals at the end of the course English Writing 3, following English Writing 1 and 2 lasting for one academic year. Before taking lectures on rebuttals, they showed little or no knowledge of rebuttal writing, since none of them had discussed about others’ ideas or ideas opposite to their own in their previous essays.

Approval was obtained from participants across different groups. A total of 136 participants provided consent to have their responses to open-ended questions analyzed. Within this group, 68 participants consented to the inclusion of their writing responses (114 essays and 22 outlines) to the TEM4 prompts, as well as their questionnaire data on emotions in rebuttal-writing classes. An additional 47 participants from the same cohort (i.e., the original 136)

agreed to share their questionnaire responses on emotions. This combined consent resulted in 115 participants (68+47) whose emotion-related data in rebuttal-writing classes were analyzed.

3.3 Requirements of a High-stakes Test for Chinese English Majors, Band 4

The present work discusses rebuttal writing required in a high-stakes test for Chinese English majors, band 4 (TEM4). Its certificate is a fundamental requirement for English majors to seek employment and hence is regarded seriously by them. Its rubrics state explicitly that a response to writing prompts is required.

When receiving instruction in rebuttal writing, participants were required to write an essay responding to 2019 TEM4 writing prompt and an essay or outline based on 2018 TEM4 writing prompt (both prompts provided in Appendix B). They were told that they were expected to find refutable ideas in writing prompts and write rebuttals accordingly.

3.4 Instruments

3.4.1 Open-ended Questions

Six open-ended questions were designed to aid participants in determining why they had failed to recognize weak ideas and to identify their weaknesses successfully in their writing to 2018 and 2019 TEM4 writing prompts. The questions were assigned as homework so as to be considered seriously and were in Chinese to be comprehended thoroughly. 136 participants submitted their assignments in Chinese or in English as they liked and permitted to have their responses researched.

3.4.2 An Adapted Version of the Questionnaire on Emotions Related to Rebuttal-writing Classes

A version of the class-related emotions questionnaire developed by Bieleke et al. (2021)

was adapted to pertain to rebuttal-writing classes. Three positive emotions (enjoyment, pride, and hope) and five negative ones (anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, and boredom) were measured on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree.” In addition, an open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire to enable participants to disclose additional emotions. The questionnaire is in Chinese and was pilot-tested to ensure that it has no language and content problems. Self-ratings on emotions using semantic differentials or Likert scales may be subject to cognitive biases and social desirability effects. However, they remain a convenient and cost-effective method for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Dewaele & Li, 2020).

The study’s sample size is 115, with a 32-item questionnaire. Reliability and validity tests showed that the Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.827 indicating good reliability), the KMO value was 0.904, the Bartlett’s spherical test result was 3353.894 ($df = 496.000$), and 5 factors were extracted after rotation with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 71.76%. Overall, the questionnaire has good reliability and validity for measuring emotions toward English rebuttal-writing classes.

3.4.3 Rebuttal Writing Instructions and Data Collection Procedures

The duration of rebuttal writing instruction is four weeks (see Rebuttal Writing Instruction Slides in Appendix A).

In the first week, students learned the definition of rebuttals and the corresponding implementation steps. They were also presented with six out of eight evaluative perspectives on ideas, which are concept, assumption, reasoning, implications, purpose and information. These perspectives drew loosely on the elements of reasoning proposed by Paul & Elder (2006).

The eight angles were revealed by the analysis of a passage in support of the revival of traditional Chinese characters. To prevent participants from becoming overwhelmed by all the angles, it was made clear to students that they typically needed to examine ideas from one to two angles to determine what was flawed. Outside of class, students were required to keep a reflective journal and to evaluate a passage from the above six angles.

In the second week, the last two angles—opposite and consequence—were explained to students; a video of a debate in a television program was played to help them better understand how the eight angles were used to refute; the eight angles were classified into four groups for students' better understanding and application; then a discussion was held about the second homework in the first week; an analysis of how an essay took the angles was conducted. After class students were required to do 2019 TEM4 simulative writing and read the first sample essay in textbooks with a critical eye.

In the third week, students reviewed rebuttals by viewing a short video of a talk, analyzed with the teacher the first sample essay in textbooks, and received teacher's feedback on their 2019 TEM4 simulated writing performance. Outside of class, students revised their 2019 TEM4 simulated essay, composed an essay or outline (a choice allowed for alleviation of students' pressure) based on 2018 TEM4 writing prompt, and read the second sample essay which refuted the first one.

In the last week, students studied rebuttals further by analyzing the second sample essay and listening to teacher's feedback on their 2018 TEM4 simulative writing. Out of class, students reflected on their rebuttals writing by responding to the aforementioned six open-ended questions and the modified survey on emotions experienced in rebuttals writing classes.

To prevent Hawthorne effects, the purpose of the study and the use of student work were disclosed only after the four-week course, when written consent was obtained. The affiliated college's Ethical Committee approved the research design.

3.5 Data Coding and Analysis

The valid data comprise 136 essays and outlines submitted by 68 participants (7 males, 61 females), including 114 essays (N=114) and 22 outlines (N=22) in response to 2018 and 2019 TEM4 writing prompts and their corresponding self-reports of emotions in rebuttal-writing classes, entirely 115 self-reports (10 males', 105 females'), and 136 participants (23 males, 113 females)' answers to six open questions on self-perceived reasons for unsatisfying and no rebuttal writing.

In order to answer research question one, rebuttal-writing performance in response to 2018 and 2019 TEM4 writing prompts was rated using the criteria established by Erduran et al. (2004) and von Aufschnaiter et al. (2008). One point was awarded for one clearly identified refutable idea or one effective explanation of reasons for a refutable idea. The total score is four, with two points for identifying a total of two refutable ideas and two for providing justifications for the two feeble ideas. The rebuttal performance was independently evaluated by two researchers. Initial agreement was 92.65%, with 100% agreement achieved after further discussion.

To answer the second research question, researchers performed coding of 136 responses, containing 24,397 Chinese characters and English words, to the six open questions. Initially, the author underlined all words or phrases (N=259) related to reasons for ineffective or non-existent rebuttals and examined closely and coded carefully 100 of them to achieve theoretical

saturation and obtained 18 themes. Then the 18 themes were discussed with another researcher thoroughly and modified repeatedly to be inclusive, precise, and accurate. Afterwards, based on the 18 themes they analyzed and encoded all the responses independently. 80.57% of the frequency of each theme in their coding was identical. Following consultation, 100% agreement was achieved.

On the basis of the shared characteristics summarized by a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis, the 18 open codes were then classified into 5 axial codes. Table 1 in section 4.2 shows the frequency and percentage of 18 open codes and 5 axial codes and Appendix C displays their corresponding instances.

To answer the last research question, SPSS 26.0 was used to analyze 115 self-reports of eight emotions in rebuttal-writing classes, the mean of positive emotions (MPE) and the mean of negative emotions (MNE), and the relationship between rebuttal writing and emotions in rebuttal-writing classes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Performance of Rebuttals in L2 Writing Among Chinese EFL Learners

Out of 68 participants, one participant's (1.47%) rebuttal writing was awarded 3 points, 16 participants' (23.53%) 2 points, and 3 participants' (4.41%) 1 point. 70.59% of participants earned no points at all. No students gained full marks. Despite around four-week instruction in rebuttal writing, their performance falls far short of expectations, in consistent with the findings of the research on Chinese EFL writers' source-use skills and argument evaluation (Du, 2019; Du & Gao, 2024), justifying the need to investigate the reasons for ineffective and non-existent rebuttals.

4.2 L2 Writing Learners' Self-Perceived Reasons for Ineffective and Non-Existent

Rebuttals

As is shown in Table 1, the reasons perceived by 136 participants for ineffective and non-existent rebuttals are multi-factorial, including 18 items classified into 5 categories.

Table 1 The Frequency and Percentage of 18 Open Codes and 5 Axial Codes

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency	Percentage	
Habit-related Reasons	-Not habituated to thinking deeply of materials	52	20.08%	27.80%
	-Not habituated to caring about materials or reality	14	5.41%	
	-Not habituated to defining concepts	6	2.32%	
Competence-related Reasons	-Lack of reading comprehension	34	13.13%	35.91%
	-Lack of writing strategies	27	10.42%	
	-Lack of expressive skills	15	5.79%	
	-Lack of critical thinking	12	4.63%	
	-Lack of independent thinking	3	1.16%	
	-Lack of practice	2	0.77%	
Idea-conflict Reasons	-Influence by valid ideas in materials	23	8.88%	15.44%
	-Influence by previous learning experience	9	3.47%	
	-Diffidence in one's own ideas	8	3.09%	
Awareness-related Reasons	-Lack of awareness to rebut or query the material	17	6.56%	11.97%
	-Lack of awareness of objectives of argumentation	13	5.02%	
	-Lack of awareness of the significance of rebuttal writing	1	0.39%	
Knowledge-related Reasons	-Lack of knowledge related to materials	11	4.25%	8.88%
	-Vocabulary-related reasons	7	2.70%	
	-Grammar-related reasons	5	1.93%	
Total		259	100%	

Competence-related reasons are the most primary, accounting for 35.91%. Among all the 18 reasons “lack of reading comprehension” (13.13%) is the second, justifying the importance of reading ability in rebuttal writing and critical thinking. Du and Gao (2024) and

Durkin (2004) note that spending too much time on understanding texts probably leaves participants with insufficient capacity or willingness to critique shortcomings and write about them in English. “Lack of practice” (0.77%) is not frequently referred to directly by participants, but it is closely linked with other significant competence-related reasons, since reading, writing, expression, independent thinking, and critical thinking (Durkin, 2004) have to be honed through practice, which entails a proper length of time. This is supported by El Soufi and See’s (2019) and Liu and Stapleton’s (2020) findings that time is required for teaching intervention to enable students to include counterarguments, targets of rebuttals, in their writing.

Habit-related reasons are the second most influential (27.8%). “Not habituated to thinking deeply of materials” (20.08%) is evident in the maximum number of participants’ responses, like “I have not thought about every word and every sentence”. Presumably, many participants have just skimmed writing prompts, considered ideas in them superficially, and performed minimal or no evaluation of ideas. This may be accounted for by the uneasiness resulting from rebuttals, making participants consistently avoid critique, even when taught otherwise (Du & Gao, 2024). Another possible reason could be about the avoidance of high uncertainty which is associated with in-depth thinking, since Eastern Asian students expect to be given definite answers, instead of challenging experts and doing reflection themselves (Durkin, 2004). The habit-related reason “not habituated to caring about materials or reality” (5.41%) is also observed, relate to mixing one’s own ideas with reality (Chen, 2016) and exemplified by self-centred individuals who believe that what they see and think are facts and are indifferent to other ideas (Paul & Elder, 2006). Noteworthy is that habits also require time to form, echoing that time is needed for the development of competence.

Idea-conflict reasons rank third, occupying 15.44% of the total. Interestingly, contrary to the above habit-related reason “not habituated to caring about materials or reality” is the idea-conflict reason “influence by valid ideas in materials” (8.88%). These two reasons as well as “diffidence in one’s own ideas” (3.09%) show that students raised in Chinese culture may experience difficulty in having an appropriate interaction between their own thoughts and others’ ideas. These idea-conflict reasons are an echo of “taking a critical view of sources...emphasizes the relation between a source author’s ideas and those of the writer” (Du, 2019, p. 55) and “students...may be readily swayed by an author’s argument” (Du & Gao, 2014, p. 10). Sun and Wang (2020) state that Chinese students possess a mid-range level of self-efficacy concerning their writing, explaining why they are influenced by other ideas and unconfident in their own when writing an essay.

Another idea-conflict reason, “influence by previous learning experience” (3.47%), shows participants’ another struggle when learning rebuttal writing. Students’ prior learning experiences have immediate relevance to and exert strong influence on their critical thinking performance (Tian & Low, 2011). In the teaching of writing in East Asian languages, alternative ideas including counterarguments are rarely addressed (Liu, 2005; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). Rebuttals are not highly expected in Chinese argumentative writing (Wang, 1994), and the assessment of such writing focuses more on linguistic proficiency than on ideas and content (Ai, 2015). Reading instruction at all levels in China is for reading comprehension rather than for evaluation of reading materials (Du & Gao, 2024). All these make rebuttal writing and critical thinking foreign to many Chinese students. This is also demonstrated by the two awareness-related reasons--lack of awareness to rebut or query the

material (6.56%) and lack of awareness of the significance of rebuttal writing (0.39%).

Generally speaking, not having the habit of thinking deeply about materials is the most prominent reason for ineffective and non-existent rebuttals in the writing of Chinese L2 writing learners. They are also short of a skill set including reading skills, writing techniques, expression skills, and critical thinking, which necessitate adequate time and practice. Besides, they can be manipulated by sound ideas in materials and their past learning experience to the extent that they tend to ignore refutable ideas.

4.3 Rebuttal Deficiencies and Emotional States in Rebuttal-Writing Classes

A survey of 400 Chinese middle school students conducted by Shi (2006) showed that having one's own opinion was not a crucial trait of effective learners. The values upheld by critical thinking are distinct from those promoted by Confucianism in Chinese culture (Atkinson, 1997). It could be hypothesized that rebuttal-writing classes might evoke more negative sentiments than positive ones of Chinese L2 writing learners.

Table 2 Normality Test Results for Eight Emotions

Emotions	n	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	df	p
enjoyment	115	15.48	2.657	-.924	2.985	115	<.001
pride	115	14.49	2.566	-.731	2.264	115	<.001
hope	115	13.96	2.532	-.472	1.914	115	.001
anxiety	115	9.37	3.373	.220	-.478	115	.004
shame	115	8.68	3.614	.298	-.573	115	<.001
boredom	115	7.04	3.105	.990	1.408	115	<.001
anger	115	6.7	2.636	.796	.390	115	<.001
hopeless	115	6.27	2.634	.878	-.055	115	<.001
MPE	115	14.64	2.319	-.996	3.660	115	<.001
MNE	115	7.61	2.519	.292	-.746	115	.001

MPE = Mean of positive emotions; MNE = Mean of negative emotions.

Lilliefors significance correction applied.

According to Table 2, participants are indeed exposed to negative emotions, including anxiety (M=9.37, SD=3.373), shame (M=8.68, SD=3.614), and boredom (M=7.04, SD=3.105).

However, the most prominent emotion is enjoyment ($M=15.48$, $SD=2.657$). In addition, despite substantial room for improvement of rebuttal writing, participants hold out hope ($M=13.96$, $SD=2.532$) that they could and would understand teaching materials in rebuttal-writing classes, and they are generally proud ($M=14.49$, $SD=2.566$) of what they have learned and accomplished in rebuttal-writing classes. The mean of every positive emotion is greater than that of every negative emotion and every positive emotion is statistically distinct from every negative emotion ($p=.00$). It is also the case with MPE and MNE ($p=.00$).

Table 2 also illustrates that the eight emotions are not normally distributed ($p<.05$). Therefore, Friedman's 2-way ANOVA by ranks and Wilcoxon signed rank test were used to determine the statistical difference between the eight emotions and between MPE and MNE respectively. The outcomes are displayed in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 Friedman's 2-Way ANOVA by Ranks of Eight Emotions

Comparison	Test Statistic	SE	Standardized Statistic	p	padj.
hopeless-hope	3.735	.323	11.562	<.001	<.001
hopeless-pride	4.130	.323	12.787	<.001	<.001
hopeless-enjoyment	4.752	.323	14.711	<.001	<.001
anger-hope	3.391	.323	10.498	<.001	<.001
anger-pride	3.787	.323	11.723	<.001	<.001
anger-enjoyment	4.409	.323	13.648	<.001	<.001
boredom-hope	3.183	.323	9.852	<.001	<.001
boredom-pride	3.578	.323	11.077	<.001	<.001
boredom-enjoyment	4.200	.323	13.002	<.001	<.001
shame-hope	2.013	.323	6.232	<.001	<.001
shame-pride	2.409	.323	7.457	<.001	<.001
shame-enjoyment	3.030	.323	9.381	<.001	<.001
anxiety-hope	1.578	.323	4.886	<.001	<.001
anxiety-pride	1.974	.323	6.111	<.001	<.001
anxiety-enjoyment	2.596	.323	8.035	<.001	<.001

All comparisons tested the null hypothesis that the distributions of the two samples are equal.

Two-sided tests with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels (adjusted p-value).

Table 4 Related Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test of MPE and MNE

Null Hypothesis	Test	p	Decision
Median difference (MPE-Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test) MNE) equals 0		<.001	Reject the null

MPE= mean of positive emotions; MNE= mean of negative emotions

The results of Table 3 and Table 4 show that all the emotional pairs have significant differences ($p < .001$) and there is a significant difference between MPE and MNE ($p < .001$).

It is of great probability that participants in rebuttal-writing classes have experienced more positive than negative emotions. Chinese students have been found to rarely express their disagreements directly to instructors (Shi, 2006). The data of the present study on positive emotions display that provided opportunities like learning rebuttal writing in classes, they may actually love expressing their diverse viewpoints. This may offer Chinese students a novel learning experience and an outlet for their typically repressed in-class emotions.

By Spearman correlation coefficient test, the relationship between rebuttal writing and emotions in rebuttal-writing classes ($N=68$) was analyzed. The outcome is shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Correlations Between Rebuttal Writing Scores and Emotions in Rebuttal-Writing Classes

	Score for Rebuttals	MPE-MNE
Score for Rebuttals	—	.002
MPE-MNE	.002	—
p (two-tailed)	—	.988

MPE = mean of positive emotions; MNE = mean of negative emotions. MPE–MNE represents the difference between positive and negative emotion scores. Correlation coefficients (r_s) are shown above the diagonal, p values below. $N=68$

Results in Table 5 reveal that rebuttal writing scores have no significant correlation with learners' in-class emotions ($r_s=.002$, $p=.988$), indicating that classroom emotional experience does not exert a statistically significant influence on rebuttal writing performance. The nonsignificant correlation between in-class emotions and rebuttal performance can be

interpreted from methodological, task-related, and learner contextual perspectives.

Methodologically, the emotion data relied on learners' self-reported Likert-scale responses, which are susceptible to social desirability bias and retrospective memory deviation. The adapted questionnaire measured general emotional experience in rebuttal-writing classes rather than momentary affective states during actual writing tasks, reducing the sensitivity of the measurement instrument to capture subtle emotion-performance links.

From a task perspective, rebuttal writing is cognitively demanding, requiring L2 learners to comprehend source materials, identify flawed arguments, evaluate logical loopholes, and construct counterarguments in accurate English expression. Such high cognitive load consumes most learners' mental resources, leaving limited room for classroom emotions to exert a substantial influence on writing outcomes. In this sense, cognitive engagement rather than affective experience dominates learners' rebuttal performance.

Contextually, the positive emotions reported in classroom learning contexts cannot be fully transferred to independent after-class TEM4 writing tasks. Furthermore, rooted in Confucian cultural values of harmony and face maintenance, Chinese EFL learners tend to express positive attitudes toward classroom learning while remaining psychologically reserved in challenging others' viewpoints. This discrepancy further weakens the statistical association between self-rated emotions and actual rebuttal writing performance.

5. Implications

The study finds that most L2 writing learners (70.59%) wrote no or ineffective rebuttals, they attributed this to habit-related reasons like not being accustomed to thinking deeply, competence-related reasons like lack of reading comprehension, idea-conflict reasons like

influence by valid ideas in materials, and other multiple reasons. They were found to experience primarily positive emotions in rebuttal-writing classes, which did not significantly influence their rebuttal writing. As emphasized by Xu et al. (2025), creating supportive learning settings to foster critical thinking is fundamental to advancing learners' overall wisdom development. Based on the above findings and scholarly insights, several implications can be proposed for critical thinking cultivation and L2 writing instruction.

A common practice and explicit advice in cultivating critical thinking should be encouraging deep reflection on ideas in materials. Teachers should initially and consecutively instruct students to think profoundly, through requiring them to read materials attentively for an appropriate number of times, asking questions about certain ideas from different perspectives, and designing tasks like students writing down or speaking out their understanding and evaluative thoughts of ideas in materials. Instructors should not prioritize students establishing their own position over their closely reading, understanding, and evaluating others' thoughts in materials.

In addition, it is crucial for instructors to check whether students have a correct comprehensive understanding of materials and to offer corresponding assistance. Overlooking students' reading comprehension of materials in critical thinking and L2 writing instruction can be problematic. Students may just follow passively instructors' understanding and thoughts in class, while having difficulty comprehending materials, thus preventing them from completing other more demanding tasks like evaluation of ideas in materials.

Furthermore, the instruction of critical thinking is suggested to be implemented since childhood. Learning English argumentative writing could be a dramatic culture shock to EFL

Chinese learners (Zhang, 2009). In the Chinese culture, students often have to memorize information, leaving them with few reasons to engage in argumentation (Durkin, 2004; Jonassen & Kim, 2010). The early instruction of critical thinking to Chinese children would render more time for them to understand the necessity to do rebuttals, acquire habits and competence required for rebuttal writing and critical thinking, make them evaluate others' ideas more spontaneously, and express their viewpoints with greater confidence. Liu and Stapleton (2020) also suggest that L2 learners and first language users of English can be taught written counter-argumentation as early as elementary school.

Additionally, instructors can rest assured that within the Confucian context students generally regard learning rebuttal writing in classes as a pleasurable activity.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

This study seeks to have an insight of L2 writing learners' rebuttal performance, identify their self-perceived reasons for ineffective and non-existent rebuttals, and explore whether their emotions in rebuttal-writing classes are accountable, with the ultimate purpose of better knowledge on how to develop students' critical thinking.

Participants of the study perform unsatisfactorily in rebuttal writing. Their being not used to thinking deeply of materials is the most dominant reason. Besides, positive emotions in class suggest that learners may embrace rebuttal writing and emotions do not hinder their performance.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample was restricted to English majors from only one university, with a severely imbalanced gender ratio and very few male participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings to non-English

majors, students from other regions, and male EFL learners. Second, this study, on the basis of the teacher and researcher's observation that before learning rebuttal writing in class, students wrote no rebuttals in their works, lacked pre-intervention baseline data on learners' initial rebuttal writing competence and in-class emotions before the four-week instructional intervention.

Future research can adopt a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test baseline data, and include both experimental and control groups to better isolate the instructional effect. Moreover, expanding the sample to cover multiple universities, non-English majors, and more male participants is recommended to enhance representativeness. Further studies may also employ experience sampling methods to collect real-time emotional data during writing tasks, so as to avoid retrospective self-report bias and achieve a more nuanced understanding of the emotion--rebuttal performance relationship.

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Appendix A Rebuttal Writing Instruction Slides

Counter-argumentation
Point out what is wrong or weak in opposing claims or evidence.

How to conduct counter-argumentation?
Which two steps are compulsory?

Step 1: Introducing the opposing argument
Step 2: Acknowledging the validity of part of the opposing argument
Step 3: Refuting the opposing argument
Step 4: Drawing a conclusion by summarizing the insufficiency of the opposing argument or restating the author's own position

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Which two steps are compulsory?

Step 1: Introducing the opposing argument
Step 2: Acknowledging the validity of part of the opposing argument
Step 3: Refuting the opposing argument
Step 4: Drawing a conclusion by summarizing the insufficiency of the opposing argument or restating the author's own position

Please identify the four steps of counter-argumentation in the following passage.

Introducing, acknowledging, refuting, and concluding

"Second, students with part-time jobs tend to spend their money wisely. It is frequently argued that working while at university promotes a materialistic and materialistic lifestyle. [Admittedly, it may be the case for the few students who can earn easy money with their extraordinary talents.] Nevertheless, we can't ignore the fact that part-time jobs, due to their low standards, don't come with high salaries generally. In this case, hard-earned money appears more precious than any cash flow. A recent survey released by Citi and Seventeen magazine discovered that two-thirds of college students with part-time jobs planned to maintain a budget and paid for many of their college expenses themselves. Instead of taking large sums of money for granted, students with part-time jobs learn to develop a better sense of money management. [Therefore, part-time jobs play a positive part in teaching students to manage their own money.]"

How to find out what is wrong or weak

Think deeply.
Read very closely and carefully.

Please identify the four steps of counter-argumentation in the following passage.

Introducing, acknowledging, refuting, and concluding

"Online shopping has become a prevalent and generally safe method of acquiring goods. Some critics may argue that customers face potential risks associated with electronic payment. Indeed, there are not a few news reports on the instances of online shopping fraud. However, these cases are relatively rare compared to the vast number of successful transactions. The majority of people do not suffer financial losses from online shopping. This is largely due to robust legal frameworks such as China's 'Consumer Rights Protection Law' and the 'E-commerce Law,' which are specifically designed to safeguard consumers' rights and interests during online transactions by providing clear guidelines and recourse for disputes. As a result, there is a firm foundation for trust and security in the online marketplace."

30

It is absurd to ask most Chinese people who are using simplified characters to read traditional characters because of their good look and reasonable structure because characters are language which is mainly for communication rather than for appreciation of beauty and structure. And this reason is merely about personal preference, because simplified ones, in most a few people's words, could also have a beautiful look and structure. And in fact, there is nothing wrong to such a degree that the current situation should be changed.

✓ This is the refutation of the ideas on the YES side from all the 8 angles.
✓ In practice, you merely need to find out what is wrong or weak from **one angle**.

Refutation from Multiple Angles

Refutation from Multiple Angles

Refutation by Four Standards

A video for better understanding of the eight angles

Topic: 我的伴侣在大城市找到一份很好的工作，我最好不要跟他一起去？

Think about what angles Jin Jing has taken to refute her imaginary friend's ideas.

Passage 1 for Refutation Practice

Non-Chinese majors should not sit for one exam to compete against Chinese majors in the Preliminary Contest of the "Yanhuang Cup" Chinese Writing Contest. Otherwise, it is of little possibility for them to win the Special Award to take part in the Provincial Contest, which would make them feel frustrated. To encourage them to study Chinese writing, teachers should write two test papers for Chinese and non-Chinese majors, a difficult one for the former and an easy one for the latter, and there should be both a Chinese major and a non-Chinese major to represent SCBC in the provincial contest.

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What is a contest? [concept]
Why should there be a great possibility for non-Chinese majors? [assumption]
What is frustration? [concept]
What is the situation? [concept]
Is frustration a bad thing? [assumption]

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1. What is encouragement? [concept]
2. Are Chinese majors' Chinese writing ability certainly more remarkable than non-Chinese majors? [assumption]
3. Why won't there be two Chinese majors or two non-Chinese majors to present SCBC in the provincial contest? [opposite]
4. What is the contest rule about the major of contestants? [information]
5. What would happen if there were two test papers by which one Chinese major and one non-Chinese major were selected to present SCBC in the provincial contest? [consequence]

Non-Chinese majors should not sit for one exam to compete with Chinese majors in the Preliminary Contest of the "Yanhuang Cup" Chinese Writing Contest. Otherwise, it is of little possibility for them to win the Special Award to take part in the Provincial Contest. They would feel frustrated. To encourage them to study Chinese writing, teachers should write two test papers for Chinese and non-Chinese majors, a difficult one for the former and an easy one for the latter, and there should be both a Chinese major and a non-Chinese major to present SCBC in the provincial contest.

Are the reasons adequate and logical to support "there should be both a Chinese major and a non-Chinese major to present SCBC in the provincial contest"? [reasons]
What is the teacher's purpose? [purpose]

"The Quality of Our Thinking Is Given in the Quality of Our Questions."

--Linda Elder and Richard Paul (Experts at critical thinking)

As remote communication technology develops, people today have the choice of studying at home using the Internet. Should you choose this way or would you prefer study at traditional schools? The two ways are the opposite, otherwise both sides are quite close to home, as we can see from the following text.

Studying at traditional schools
Studying at home
Studying at traditional schools is a good way for most of the students. It has many advantages. It provides a place where all the students spend most of their time together, which allows friendship to last long to be benefited. Students will benefit from this way in school. However, time can be precious knowledge all of their life. Moreover, students can also learn from their teachers and classmates and whether they want to learn by themselves. The learning atmosphere of the traditional classrooms helps students pay attention to the only teacher in a class at traditional schools, whereas the students are more likely to delay and easily become bored at home. They can also pause for a while and solve the questions at once. It is a feeling of "you and here".

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Appendix B 2018 and 2019 TEM4 Writing Prompts, Refutable Ideas and Rebuttal Sample

Year	TEM4 writing prompts and refutable ideas(underlined>	rebuttal sample
2018	Read carefully the following excerpt and then write your response in NO LESS THAN 200 words, in which you should: (1) summarize the main message of the report, and then (2) comment on the two points made by Stephen Corry, Survival's Director. You can support yourself with information from the report. Marks will be awarded for content relevance, content sufficiency, organization and language quality. Failure to follow the above instructions may result in a loss of marks. Report exposes the dark side of conservation A report launched by Survival International—the global movement for tribal peoples' rights—reveals how conservation has led to the eviction of millions of tribal people from "protected areas", since "protected areas" like national parks should generally be "no go" for mining, agriculture, dams, roads and pipelines. Survival's report shows that nearly all protected areas are, or have been, the ancestral homelands of tribal peoples, who have been dependent on, and managed them for thousands of years. But in the name of "conservation", tribal peoples are being "illegally driven out" from these lands and accused of "poaching"; meanwhile, tourists and fee-paying big-game hunters are welcomed in. Bushman Daugoo Xukuri from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana said, "I sit and look around the country. Wherever there are bushmen, there is game. Why? Because we know how to take care of animals." Survival's report concludes that the current model of conservation needs a radical shake-up. Conservation must stick to international law, protect tribal peoples' rights to their lands, listen to them, and then be prepared to back them up as much as they can. Survival's Director Stephen Corry said, "Millions are being spent by conservationists every year, and yet the environment is in deepening crisis. It's time to wake up and realize that there is another way and it's much, much better. Firstly, tribal peoples' rights have to be acknowledged and respected. Secondly, they have to be treated as the best experts at defending their own lands. Conservationists must realize it's they, themselves, who are junior partners."	The second point is exaggerated, because experts should be individuals with specialized knowledge and abilities, which given the context should be about the environmental protection of tribal peoples' homelands. Although tribal people are familiar with their lands, they are not environment conservation experts, let alone "best experts."

2019

Read carefully the following excerpt and then write your response in NO LESS THAN 200 WORDS, in which you should

- 1) Summarize the main message of the excerpt, and then
- 2) Comment on Brewer's view that parents should join in with their kids rather than limit their media consumption.

You can support yourself with information from the excerpt.

Marks will be awarded for content relevance, content sufficiency, organization and language quality.

Failure to follow the above instructions may result in a loss of marks.

How much screen time is too much for kids?

Parents have been advised to limit media consumption of their children, but research suggests it's the nature of it that matters.

For many parents in the digital age, battles with their kids over screen time and devices have become a depressing part of family life. Many parents will now be relieved to hear that recent research suggests that it's not so much the length, but the nature of the screen time that matters.

Jocelyn Brewer, a psychologist who specializes in the concept of "digital nutrition", likens media diets to what's on our plates: rather than counting calories (or screen time), think about what you're eating.

"It's not just about whether you consume any potential digital junk foods, but also your relationship to technology and the role it plays in your family life," says Brewer.

For young children, the most important thing is whether parents and kids are playing, watching or browsing together.

A study of 20,000 parents published late last year by the Oxford Internet Institute and Cardiff University determined that there was no correlation between limiting device use and children's well-being. The study's lead author Dr. Andrew Przybylski said: "Our findings suggest the broader family context how parents set rules about digital screen time, and if they're actively engaged in exploring the digital world together, are more important than the raw screen time."

"The consensus is that screen time, in and of itself, is not harmful and reasonable restrictions vary greatly, depending on a child's behavior and personality. There is little point in worrying about how many minutes a day your kids are spending with screens," says Brewer. "Instead, parents should be doing what they can to ensure that what they're watching, playing and reading is high-quality, age-appropriate and safe and joining in wherever possible."

The detrimental effects of extended screen time on physical health have been universally confirmed. The damage can include impaired vision, back pain, and shoulder pain. It makes sense for parents to worry about screen time for children's development.

Appendix C Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Corresponding Instances

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Instances
Habit-related Reasons	-Not habituated to thinking deeply of materials	-“I have not thought about every word and every sentence.”
	-Not habituated to caring about materials or reality	-“I have been just focused on my own thoughts, ...not done thinking based on the material.”
	-Not habituated to defining concepts	-“I haven’t thought from the angle of concept, not thinking what is the definition of ‘experts’.”
Competence-related Reasons	-Lack of reading comprehension	-“I haven’t fully understood the material.”
	-Lack of expressive skills	-“I don’t know what tone I should use to rebut.”
	-Lack of writing strategies	-“I have thought about rebuttals against ‘no necessity of time limitation’, but I don’t know how to integrate it with my own ideas.”
	-Lack of practice	-“I am insensitive to refutable ideas; I need more practice.”
	-Lack of independent thinking	-“I have no my own ideas.”
	-Lack of critical thinking	-“I haven’t read the writing prompt with a critical eye.”

Idea- conflict Reasons	-Influence by valid ideas in materials	-“A majority of or some ideas are sound, so I tend to find excuses for those refutable or weird ideas.”
	-Influence by previous learning experience	-“Since childhood, few teachers have encouraged us to make rebuttals.”
	-Diffidence in one’s own ideas	-“I have figured out something wrong, but I haven’t dared to affirm my thoughts.”
Awareness- related Reasons	-Lack of awareness to rebut or query the material	-“I thought that materials must be right.”
	-Lack of awareness of objectives of argumentation	-“I think that it is easy to do my writing if I follow the ideas in the material.”
	-Lack of awareness of the significance of rebuttal writing	-“I will take rebuttal writing more seriously.”
Knowledge- related Reasons	-Lack of knowledge related to materials	-“I am not familiar with the related information on the material.”
	-Grammar-related reasons	-“I have problems about grammar.”
	-Vocabulary-related reasons	-“I have not used accurate words.”