Compounded Access: How Chinese Neurodivergent Students and Professionals Navigate English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Neurodivergent individuals face various barriers in academic and professional settings. Parallelly, English as second language (L2) speakers encounter distinct challenges when English is the medium of work and evaluation. Yet HCI has paid little attention to the intersection of these identities, where the demands of English-as-L2 use and neurodivergent cognition can magnify. Through interviews with 19 Chinese students and professionals with ADHD, dyslexia, or dysgraphia, we found that cognitive processing strengths in Chinese became difficulties when applied to English, task-level demands compressed attentional resources, technologies both supported and constrained access needs, and authority and institutional contexts determined which access strategies were viable. We develop *compounded access* as an analytic framing to document the strategies participants developed and the frictions they encountered at the intersection of neurodivergence and L2, and outline design considerations to support neurodivergent individuals learning, communicating, and working in English as a second language.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in accessibility**.

Keywords

Chinese, Neurodivergent, second language, non-native speaker, accessibility, intersectionality, ADHD, learning disabilities, dyslexia

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1 Introduction

Accessibility and HCI research are increasingly investigating how neurodivergent individuals navigate academic and professional settings [22, 32, 55, 84, 118]. This work has demonstrated how people with ADHD, dyslexia, autism, and related conditions negotiate formal accommodations [55, 91], build informal workarounds to sustain participation [5, 22], and collaboratively create access with colleagues, supervisors, and peers [74, 133]. In a separate research thread, scholars have examined how people who use English as a second language (L2) [72] navigate Western academic contexts [3, 47, 77] and documented the communicative friction, cognitive cost, and identity negotiation involved when English is both the medium and the standard of evaluation [1, 3, 68, 77]. Yet we know less about how people who sit at the intersection of these identities, neurodivergent and L2 English speakers, navigate these settings.

Intersectional identities produce distinct challenges and require distinct forms of support. Crenshaw [19, 20]'s foundational work established that individuals holding multiple marginalized identities experience systems of oppression in ways that a single-axis analysis cannot capture, and HCI research has since extended this insight to disability, examining how intersections with race [53], language [23], and other identities [30, 43, 65] shape access. This line of work is still nascent, and the intersection of neurodivergence and English-as-L2 use has received little attention in HCI, despite involving large and growing populations [59, 96, 110, 113] whose access needs likely fall through the gaps of disability services and language support [67, 88, 114]. For students and professionals at this intersection, English is often simultaneously the medium through which they must demonstrate competence and a site of cognitive cost that shapes and is shaped by their neurodivergent traits. Studying this intersection is therefore a timely opportunity and a step toward more complete knowledge of access work.

To address this gap, we turn to Chinese neurodivergent individuals who navigate English-as-L2 in academic and professional settings. The first author's lived experience as a Chinese neurodivergent English-as-L2 speaker motivated our investigation of this population. Chinese and English differ fundamentally in orthographic structure, morphological composition, and cultural communication norms, and these differences likely produce unique intersectional challenges for neurodivergent students and professionals. Through interviews with 19 participants who have ADHD, learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia), or combinations thereof, we examined two key research questions: *1) What strategies do they develop to learn and use English, and what relational and institutional contexts shape which strategies are viable? 2) Whether, what, and how do technologies mitigate or amplify the barriers they encounter?* Our findings show that neurodivergent traits that functioned as strengths in Chinese became sources of difficulty when applied to English, while academic and professional demands compressed participants' cognitive resources. Participants responded with layered strategies that combined individual cognitive compensations, modality and language switching, and selective use of technologies.

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Yet authority relationships, cultural norms, and institutional accommodation structures shaped which strategies could be deployed in what settings, often reproducing the very barriers accommodation was meant to relieve.

We studied people with ADHD and learning disabilities to identify common patterns and differences in their L2 experience, and because both conditions affect core processes involved in L2 learning and use, e.g., executive function, reading, and writing[1]. While we use 'neurodivergent' as an umbrella term to discuss commonalities in how participants navigated English, we note that they are not a homogeneous group, and we identify each participant's specific condition when reporting findings.

Overall, we make three key contributions. First, we offer one of the first detailed empirical accounts of how Chinese neurodivergent adults navigate English-as-L2 in academic and professional settings, extending prior work that has examined experiences of neurodivergent individuals [22, 32, 55, 84, 118, 131] and L2 learners [1, 3, 47, 54, 68, 77, 79, 98] in isolation, and the intersection of disability with other identities [23, 30, 43, 53, 65]. Second, we develop *compounded access* as an analytic framing to foreground the barriers, workarounds, and accommodation needs this population encounters in English learning and use. Following recent disability literature that views access as an ongoing, relational process [8, 66], we use *compounded access* to capture how the whole ensemble through which access is enacted—the challenges participants face, the strategies and adaptations they develop, and the social, cultural, and institutional factors—is layered and magnified by the intersection of neurodivergence and L2 status, none of which can be explained by either identity alone. Third, we outline design considerations to support neurodivergent individuals learning, communicating, and working in English-as-L2, grounded in the strategies our participants use and the frictions they continue to encounter.

2 Related Work

2.1 English Use among Non-native (L2) English Speakers

Prior work has examined the challenges non-native (L2) English speakers face in communication, such as conversational control, understanding context, and interpreting emotional tone [1, 54]. In academic settings, L2 speakers struggle with instructional materials [47, 49], unfamiliar cultural references [77, 101], writing research papers [104], presentations [70, 77], and conference networking [16]. They also experience socio-emotional barriers, including stress [112, 130], self-doubt [49], embarrassment for help-seeking [3], and feelings of alienation [73].

Existing technologies exacerbate these difficulties by defaulting to English in smartphones [68], voice interfaces [97], and healthcare applications [71]. Wang et al. [119] identified five recurring translation issues in the Chinese version of Scratch, including omission, excessively technical terminology, ambiguity, inaccurate preservation of meaning, and overly literal renderings, which distort how L2 speakers access the interface [106]. Focusing on Generative AI (GenAI) use, researchers found that L2 speakers tend to view AI suggestions favorably and accept them more readily than first-language (L1) speakers [13]; yet this can lead L1 speakers to overestimate L2 speakers' proficiency during collaboration [129] and may homogenize expression toward Western norms [2].

In parallel, researchers have built new technologies to support English learning and use among L2 speakers [26, 98], including communication support tools for cross-lingual teams [27, 79, 85], and systems targeting learners from specific language backgrounds like Japanese [75, 116]. Researchers have also developed GenAI-powered tools to support various aspects of L2 learning, such as *building vocabulary* through personalized contexts [76, 105], *reading* through unfamiliar-word detection [26] and in-message explanations [98], *speaking* through gamified conversations [132], and *writing* through AI-generated phrase suggestions [13, 44].

2.2 Academic and Workplace Accessibility for Neurodivergent Individuals

HCI researchers have documented the challenges neurodivergent individuals face in academic [5, 32, 118] and professional contexts [22, 55, 92]. For instance, students with ADHD struggle to sustain focus within rigid academic structures, yet often avoid formal accommodation to prevent disclosure and rely on informal strategies instead [32]. Dyslexic individuals navigate academic writing by juggling multiple tools and drawing on collaborator support [118]. In workplaces, neurodivergent employees frequently "mask" their traits to avoid stigma-driven reactions; however, this makes them more likely to be misunderstood [55].

Consequently, researchers have built tools to support communication needs for individuals with ADHD [111, 131] and reading [4, 33, 48], writing [44, 120], spelling [99, 100], and visual attention [93] needs for dyslexic individuals. Recent work has begun exploring how GenAI can assist neurodivergent individuals in tutoring [63], job-seeking [51], communication [64], and coping with negative self-talk [15]. However, these tools can also impose pressure to align with normative communication and productivity norms [42, 63], while perpetuating biases and stereotypes against neurodivergent ways of being [41, 94, 123].

Limited work has specifically focused on English-as-L2 experience among neurodivergent people [82, 87, 115]. The ones that did investigated learning experiences of *children* and found that L2 learners with ADHD skipped letters and words due to inconsistent letter–sound correspondences in English [115]. However, we know less about how neurodivergent *adults* navigate English-as-L2 in academic and professional contexts, which is the focus of our paper.

2.3 Intersectional Identities within Accessibility Research

Recently, accessibility researchers have begun exploring how disabled people's everyday experiences and access needs are shaped by intersectional identities [9, 23, 30, 43, 53, 65]. For instance, Desai et al. [23] argued that captioning design should treat language as a core design dimension, accommodate users who switch across languages and tools by context, and support varying fluencies rather

[1]Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) impacts attention regulation, impulse control, and task-planning, among others [31]. Dyslexia makes it difficult to read, spell, and process language [34, 45, 60]. Dysgraphia hinders writing, in either translating thoughts to text or the motor act of writing [34, 61]. All are neurocognitive differences that shape neurodivergent individuals' work, learning, and everyday communication [102, 117].

than assuming fluent English speakers as defaults. With a specific focus on GenAI use, Johnson et al. [65] found that while some disabled individuals valued having different facets of their identity (disability, race, language background) reflected in GenAI outputs, others strategically leveraged GenAI's "neutralizing" of non-normative communication styles to mask or blend in, although this neutrality risked defaulting to white, English-speaking, cis-male norms. Glazko et al. [43] found that while GenAI addressed certain neurodivergent access needs, it obscured other aspects of their identity including cultural nuances and dialectal variations. We build on and extend this work by documenting accessibility practices at the intersection of neurodivergence and English-as-L2, where L2 and disability identities jointly shape access experiences in academic and professional contexts.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

With approval from our Institutional Review Board, we conducted interviews with 19 Chinese adults (14 female, 4 male, 1 non-binary; aged 18—34) who have ADHD and/or learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia). To denote participants' conditions, we use P#-A for ADHD (10), P#-Dx for dyslexia (2), and P#-Dg for dysgraphia (1), P#-D2 for dyslexia and dysgraphia (3), P#-ADx for ADHD and dyslexia (1), and P#-AD2 for all three conditions combined (2). Some participants had other co-occurring conditions (three depression, two autism, two anxiety, one tic disorder); however, our analysis centers around their experience related to ADHD and learning disabilities. Due to the well-documented challenges with formal diagnosis, we follow recent accessibility research that accepts self-diagnosis of neurodivergence [28, 29].

Participants were recruited through an online screener survey distributed across university-wide Slack channels, a WeChat[2] group, personal networks, and the Chinese social media platform RedNote (Xiaohongshu)[3]. All participants grew up in China, speak Chinese (Mandarin) as L1, and now use English as L2 frequently in their workplaces or higher education institutions. Most used English daily; we deliberately included three participants with less frequent English use (P11-Dx, P15-D2, P17-ADx) to capture variations in L2 experience. All received formal English education within China's K-12 system. Participants currently reside in the US (8), China (3), and seven other countries. Table 1 in the Appendix details participants' self-reported neurodivergent conditions, English proficiency, English learning onset, country of residence, occupation, frequency of English use, and technology used for English.

3.2 Positionality

The first author is a Chinese L1 speaker and neurodivergent (ADHD, autism); the other authors are Asian. All are English-as-L2 speakers residing in the US, with 3–10 years of experience in accessibility research. Our identities and epistemological grounding in feminist disability studies [66, 81, 121] informed our data collection and analysis, particularly in interpreting ableist norms embedded in academia and workplaces across China and elsewhere.

[2]https://www.wechat.com/en/
[3]https://apps.apple.com/us/app/rednote/id741292507

3.3 Procedure

The first author conducted semi-structured, remote interviews between November 2025—February 2026, in Chinese (17) or English (2) based on participants' preference. After obtaining verbal consent, we asked participants how neurodivergence shaped their everyday life. We then probed for English use in academic and professional settings, covering challenges across reading, writing, speaking, and listening, related workarounds, and how those varied across communication contexts (e.g., peers vs. supervisors). We also asked about social dimensions, including how participants sought assistance from colleagues and whether/how they disclosed their access needs. We then turned to participants' English-as-L2 learning histories, strategies they devised over time, and how neurodivergence shaped these experiences. Throughout, participants detailed their use of digital tools and AI (e.g., chatbots, translation applications) for English, with suggestions for technological improvement. Interviews lasted about 60—90 minutes and were video-recorded and transcribed in their original language. Chinese transcripts were translated into English by the first author. Participants received $30USD each digitally.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following reflexive thematic analysis [12], the first author open-coded all interview transcripts, taking an inductive approach. Initial codes captured specific aspects of neurodivergence and English-as-L2, e.g., difficulty with rote memorization, using GenAI for grammar and spell-checking, masking neurodivergence behind L2 experience, etc. The last author reviewed all codes and select transcripts to bring in alternative perspectives. We met regularly to discuss codes and excerpts, collated them through iterative comparison, and organized them into three overarching themes that captured the barriers, adaptations, and social-infrastructural constraints that shape how Chinese neurodivergent individuals navigate English-as-L2.

4 Findings

Participants detailed barriers that were not attributable to neurodivergence alone, nor to L2 learning alone, but that emerged from the interaction between the two and from the institutional and relational environments in which that interaction unfolded. We frame these barriers as mismatches between participants' cognitive and linguistic processing styles and the properties of English, the tasks it served, and the hierarchies in which those tasks were embedded.

4.1 Compounding Effects of English (L2) and Neurodivergent Cognition

Participants articulated where the compounding between English and neurodivergent cognition appeared and how it operated. We do not claim Chinese is inherently more accessible than English; rather, participants' lifetime engagement with Chinese as L1 had produced cognitive pathways that aligned with their neurodivergent processing styles, while English as L2 demanded processing that did not align.

4.1.1 ***Symbol-level Mismatch: Spelling and Visual Form.*** Several participants described cognitive traits that functioned as strengths when processing Chinese (e.g., semantic anchoring, spatial-visual character recognition, dense encoding) but became sources of difficulty when applied to English, whose linear alphabetic structure

provides fewer pathways for anchoring. While some challenges participants described are common among L2 learners [24, 116], they explained how these challenges exacerbated due to their neurodivergent processing patterns.

P13-Dg reported having no difficulty writing Chinese, yet found English inaccessible. What made Chinese work for her was the associative anchoring that each character of Chinese's logographic system provided: *"The character itself carries meaning for me, it has a shape, a sense of space, a feeling, it's not just a symbol."* She illustrated this with a colleague's name, Suzuki (铃木): *"The moment I read or see '铃' (bell), a shape immediately appears in my mind. And '木' (wood) is the same. From its pronunciation to its shape, there are connections."* English, however, offered neither associative richness nor reliable phonological mapping: *"English symbols themselves carry no meaning for me, and I have no way of anchoring the shape of a letter to something I can remember."*

The absence of semantic anchoring also carried into English professional terminology. Chinese anatomical terms like 锁骨 (collarbone; literally lock-bone) and 盆骨 (pelvis; literally basin-bone) are composed of characters whose meanings directly suggest the referent body part. Latin-derived English equivalents offered no such decomposable cues for P9-A, and added a vocabulary-retrieval burden on top of her ADHD-related attentional demands. For both participants with ADHD and learning disabilities, Chinese's semantic richness, visual form, phonological quality, and affective resonance supported meaning-making in ways English, as a linear string of letters encoding only pronunciation, did not.

Beyond the absence of semantic anchoring, the visual form of English words created recognition challenge. P18-AD2 found English words composed of recombined letters confusing: *"There are more words in English that look similar... like 'conversation' and 'conservation,' I might mix those up."* P16-D2 read long English words *"one letter at a time,"* but observed that letters in the middle of a word would become *"scrambled."* Chinese reading, conversely, felt more like a *"conditioned reflex"* (P12-Dx), with character forms, pronunciation, and meaning processed automatically due to *"high familiarity."* In English, each unit of text required deliberate effort, which combined with learning disabilities, further slowed reading.

P12-Dx framed this as *"slow decoding,"* where *"converting text into comprehensible information... recognition of letters and word forms, locating terminology... the speed of all these is slower than other people."* Her reading difficulties compounded in dense philosophy texts and impacted academic writing: *"I'm simultaneously thinking about the content, grammar, and the corresponding vocabulary... My attention is scattered across many things… So, the structure of my output gets messy."* Given that each word already demanded considerable processing effort due to her dyslexia, she had fewer cognitive resources left to solidify grammar and argument structure that academic writing required.

4.1.2 *Structural Mismatch: Syntax and Semantic Density.*

Navigating complex English syntax is a universal challenge in L2 acquisition; however, for our participants, structural density collided directly with neurodivergence-related nonlinear attention patterns. P19-AD2 noted she *"easily skips lines and paragraphs"* in both Chinese and English; yet *"in Chinese, it doesn't really affect my understanding of the context."* She attributed this to English's syntactic dependencies: *"English relies heavily on sentence structure... If there's a prepositional phrase and I miss the preposition, it has a big impact on understanding."* P5-A related this asymmetry to information-extraction speed: *"Chinese can help people with ADHD obtain information quickly... [For English] the subject may come first, but then there are many inserted clauses, relative clauses, and so on... [All these] make it impossible to extract information quickly."* English's syntactic structure, in which contextual meaning is distributed across function words, word order, and embedded clauses, demanded sustained sequential processing that ADHD intensified. Conversely, Chinese's higher *"information density"* (P19-AD2) per character permitted the rapid, selective scanning that participants naturally preferred. P6-A elaborated on this attentional asymmetry: *"One Chinese sentence can convey information that would take three English sentences."* For example, a Chinese sentence such as "因初试结果与预测模型不符，我们决定推迟终稿，待完成补充验证后提交。" translates into a longer construction in English: "Due to the fact that our initial results were not consistent with our predicted model, we have decided to postpone the submission of the final draft until additional verification is complete." For our participants, longer text in English required prolonged attention for the same informational yield, and unlike a spelling difficulty that can be offloaded to a spell-checker, the syntactic mismatch demanded sustained cognitive adjustment during each new reading encounter.

4.1.3 *Task-level Compounding in Academic and Professional English.*

When English shifts from a subject of study to the medium of academic and professional activity, the challenges further magnify. The cognitive demands of the task itself (e.g., specialized terminology, discipline-specific content) and those of English language processing (e.g., decoding, spelling, grammatical organization) competed simultaneously for limited cognitive resources. Neurodivergent traits (e.g., difficulty sustaining attention, slower visual decoding, and constrained working memory) further compressed available resources, leading to a three-way squeeze among task demands, language-processing demands, and the regulatory costs of managing cognition.

P4-A articulated the compounding effects on reading tasks in her US workplace where all documentation was in English: *"Reading non-native material requires a higher level of concentration than reading native language material... And if focusing attention is already difficult for you, it becomes more challenging."* P4-A's statement crystallized how English-as-L2 raised the baseline attentional demand of reading, ADHD depressed the supply, and the two conditions multiplied. P7-A described this compounding effect as *"all the negative factors piling up together."* As a retail employee in the US at the time, she found important paperwork (e.g., sales plans) extremely difficult to absorb. Sometimes she made excuses to avoid reading altogether and asked native English-speaking colleagues to relay the information verbally. The consequences extended into her professional self-worth: *"I can't take on major responsibilities... I feel like I'm always relying on other people... This affects my future."*

Task-level compounding extended beyond reading to written comprehension. P14-D2 felt that neural-network formulas she had first learned in Chinese during undergrad were harder to work with in English, as the effort that dyslexia imposed on processing the

English text left fewer resources for the mathematical reasoning itself. She described missing steps in formulas and misapplying statements, errors that *"would not have happened if it were in Chinese."* Written examinations imposed the additional overhead of simultaneously generating accurate words, grammatical structures, and argument organization. For questions requiring numerical calculations with instructions in English, P14-D2 could produce the numerical answer without difficulty, but articulating each intermediate step in English rendered the task *"extremely hard."*

Listening and oral communication in academic English introduced a different form of compounding. P8-A characterized his thinking as fast and associative due to ADHD: *"[In English] my brain is still moving fast, but my mouth doesn't know what to say... I need to first think in my head about what to say, then think about how to say it."* In Chinese, this preparation took about a second; however, in English, it took much longer and disrupted his classroom participation. He contrasted his experience with that of native English-speaking classmates: *"They can keep up with the professor's pace... but I often sit there struggling for a long time and maybe squeeze out one or two sentences."* The rapid ideation P8-A associated with ADHD outpaced what his English language processing could encode, and this gap widened under the real-time demands of academic discussion.

4.2 Adapting Through Strategies and Tools

Participants responded to the compounding effects through various compensatory strategies, cross-modal and cross-linguistic reconfigurations, and AI tools that served both as enabling infrastructure and as sources of new friction.

4.2.1 ***Cognitive Compensatory Strategies.*** Participants developed compensatory encoding strategies to make the symbols and structures of English more tractable and attempted to manually reconstruct associative and visual anchoring, which Chinese language provided automatically. Given persistent difficulties with English spelling, P13-Dg *"gave up on spelling entirely"* and focused on word recognition instead, since *"even though I could not spell, I could understand what was being expressed."* When spelling was unavoidable, she decomposed words into arbitrary subgroups with ad-hoc mnemonics, e.g., 'schedule' split into 'sche-dule,' noting that 'che' sounds like Chinese pinyin for '车' (car). However, this resulted in *"a very heavy memory module"* that decayed within days. Similarly, P16-D2 treated familiar letter combinations as unified visual chunks, e.g., considering 'techno' as a *"single letter"* for reusing it inside longer words and *"picturing it as an image"* from its music-genre association.

Beyond word levels, P16-D2 developed a symbolic notation system that bypassed text altogether. He built a notation of arrows and pictographs where each symbol carried a semantic weight: → indicated a subjective quality, ⇢ a consequence, ⇛ a symptomatic expression. This visual grammar allowed him to encode lecture content without decoding the English alphabet. P16-D2 connected this approach to *"the oracle bone script"*[4] of early Chinese characters. This strategy bypassed English's alphabetic processing by restoring multimodal semantic encoding. Because P16-D2's speaker notes during presentations consisted of these symbolic notations, he could look up at the audience and read their reactions instead of following the script line-by-line, which he described as *"my dyslexic advantage."*

However, unlike reading, P16-D2's writing strategies created new problems. He composed content primarily by recombining high-frequency sentence frames memorized by rote and then inserting task-specific information into fixed slots as *"fill-in-the-blank,"* with little generation from his own internalized sense of academic prose as a model writer might do. P16-D2 considered his strategy as functionally similar to how large language models assemble high-probability word sequences from learned patterns, which is plausibly why automated AI checkers, keyed to such surface regularities, flagged his drafts as 100% AI-generated. He noted, *"AI also generates language using algorithms... and I just forcibly turned myself into an algorithm."* The compensatory loop (neurodivergence limits reading → restricts exposure to model writing → forces template memorization → produces output indistinguishable from AI) captures how interventions that absorb one layer of compounding can introduce new barriers at another, particularly in evaluative environments increasingly sensitized to AI-generated text.

4.2.2 ***Reconfiguring Modality, Language, and Text Structures.*** Facing the compounded demands of neurodivergence and L2, participants developed alternatives that redirected cognitive effort toward less costly pathways by switching the sensory modality of input (visual reading to auditory processing), the language of processing (English to Chinese), and text structures (non-linear reading of continuous prose).

Several participants redirected English input from reading to listening when active visual processing became unsustainable. For textbooks, P6-A used Swift Read, a Chrome text-to-speech extension, since they considered listening as comparatively passive process than reading, which demanded *"active"* attention. P15-D2 used Microsoft Edge's built-in read-aloud feature to address different reading challenges (misordered words, missed letters, and skipped lines). However, audio alone was insufficient; P15-D2 needed *"reading along while listening,"* where the audio stream anchored her eyes on the correct line and mitigated line-skipping problems that dense English text provoked. P12-Dx built a *"personal vocabulary library"* using the Word Duck app by recording her own voice reading philosophy terms with *"phonetic symbols and meanings, sometimes expanding it into a full sentence."* Thus, P12-Dx shifted from decoding words letter by letter to recognizing them through auditory patterns, which lowered cognitive load over time and helped her distinguish confusing philosophy terms.

However, modality switching was not uniformly effective. P16-D2 attempted speech-to-text as a dysgraphia workaround but found that his difficulty organizing thoughts derailed the process: *"When I am speaking, I suddenly get interrupted by something else, my own thoughts interrupt my own thoughts."* When dictation was interrupted mid-utterance, the resulting text lost coherence, and he could not effectively reconstruct it because returning to a broken thought required the sustained focus he was trying to bypass.

[4]Oracle bone script (甲骨文) is an early form of Chinese writing, where characters are mostly pictographic and represent objects and concepts through visual resemblance [10, 69].

Moreover, participants frequently used Chinese as *"an aid that lowers the threshold"* (P12-Dx) for English comprehension or production by redirecting the most *"strenuous"* (P11-Dx) part of processing into a language where their cognition functioned automatically. P8-A used ChatGPT to summarize and translate English articles into Chinese to read alongside the original, especially for unknown content that's *"very hard to understand the first time through."* P7-A and P14-D2 extended this intermediate layer into writing. P7-A drafted papers in Chinese and used ChatGPT to translate, since writing directly in English was *"really painful. I feel like my thinking can't keep up."* Despite more than ten years in an English-speaking country, P7-A felt that her *"thinking habits still lean toward Chinese."* However, this strategy had structural limits. Differences in grammatical structure between Chinese and English meant P12-Dx needed to *"go back and redo it a second time."* P7-A similarly revised AI-translated content *"to make it not sound like AI."*

Some participants reconfigured long prose into a non-linear structure. P5-A parsed figures before text in academic literature, because extracting meaning from a figure *"requires me five seconds"* whereas a paragraph of comparable content required *"forty seconds."* When she tried a Chinese-to-English translation software that *"highlighted sentence-by-sentence,"* she felt unable to read *"linearly like that."* Instead, she switched to Google's full-page translation, which rendered Chinese and English versions *"side-by-side"* and let her skim selectively across figures and paragraphs. P15-D2 addressed the same density problem by annotating English materials with Goodnotes using brackets to isolate relative clauses, underlines for subjects of the main clause, and forward slashes to separate distinct points. This produced a visual restructuring of long prose that *"breaks the sentence into chunks and feeds them to the brain one piece at a time."* Where P5-A's figure-first reading bypassed prose at the document level, P15-D2's chunking restructured it at the sentence level. Both addressed the core problem that continuous English text offered too few structural landmarks for easier comprehension.

4.2.3 ***Technology-Mediated Access and Frictions.*** For many participants, digital technologies and AI made academic and workplace English tasks feasible in ways that were severely constrained. Technology substituted for reading capacity by summarizing dense texts, spelling capacity by catching errors participants could not reliably detect, and sustained attention by restructuring information into cognitively manageable formats. Yet these systems were not uniformly accessible, and their designs introduced new frictions.

Participants used digital vocabulary apps to improve contextual anchoring of words, although with varied success. P2-A critiqued Baicizhan[5], a vocabulary app that paired isolated words with disjointed images. Instead, tools that embedded vocabulary in real communicative contexts proved more effective. P3-A used Youglish[6], which retrieved video clips (e.g., TED talks) containing a searched word and provided *"a practical context with a real person speaking."* Youglish's effectiveness was grounded in what P3-A called *"scenic memory,"* where the word was encoded alongside the speaker's intonation, visual scene, and communicative situation.

[5]https://baike.baidu.com/en/item/BaiCiZhan/1470333
[6]https://youglish.com/

For many participants, AI converted writing from a high-friction activity into a routine one. Prior to AI, P13-Dg wrote emails by looking up the spelling of each word individually, a process she described as *"manageable"* but extremely slow. Now, she and P15-D2 ran their drafts through ChatGPT to catch spelling and sequencing errors dysgraphia introduced. For academic reading, P2-A and P14-D2 used AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Deepseek) to bypass inaccessible formats. P2-A asked AI to extract information from two-column academic articles that *"force you to flip back and forth, and as you keep reading you lose patience."* Similarly, P14-D2 used AI to generate tables and diagrams from papers that were *"compact in typesetting, narrow line spacing, easy to skip lines."* She found AI responses easier to read due to *"reduced text volume... clear structural organization... and classification criteria."* Thus, AI tools helped participants regenerate content into their preferred structural forms and achieve *"higher efficiency."*

Despite the benefits, AI introduced frictions from both input and output ends; some specific to neurodivergent cognition and others consistent with widely-reported problems. Effective use of AI required articulating needs with precision, but this requirement collided with neurodivergent traits that made precise articulation difficult. Due to dyslexia, P12-Dx struggled to formulate clear prompts and consequently assess the quality of AI output: *"I myself do not always know what the correct output should be."* Her prompts often carried her muddled thoughts forward and formed a feedback loop that undermined the very tasks AI was meant to support. Voice interaction presented a related input barrier. P15-D2 used ChatGPT voice transcription for real-time classroom translation, but when two voices overlapped, *"the translation completely fell apart."* She could not follow the lecture those days and subsequently disengaged from the course. On the output side, AI's presentation styles created cognitive burdens for neurodivergent readers. P19-AD2 found that ChatGPT's highly-segmented structure (short paragraphs with subheadings) made *"every paragraph feel like a key point,"* which obscured what mattered. ChatGPT also adopted a rhetorical pattern of rephrasing input followed by analysis through formulations like *"this isn't X but Y,"* which P19-AD2 found redundant and exhausting.

Other well-documented issues also caused overload specific to neurodivergent cognition. While using ChatGPT for literature search, checking for fabricated citations required the sustained close reading P5-A used AI to avoid. P4-A observed that while summarizing long documents, AI filled in plausible interpretations of domain-specific abbreviations rather than flagging uncertainty, placing the burden of detecting silent errors back on the user. Thus, AI's usefulness depended on participants' capacity to shape the interaction and the tool's accuracy in the specific domain, which often failed in ways that were detrimental to neurodivergent users.

4.3 Navigating Communication in Relational and Institutional Contexts

We found that participants' neurodivergent traits (e.g., divergent thinking, working memory demands, attentional variability) collided with the reduced fluency of L2, and relational and institutional contexts further shaped what accommodations were possible.

4.3.1 ***Amplifying Effects of Hierarchical Relationships.*** Hierarchical relationships raised the accuracy threshold expected

of participants' English output, which compressed the response window in real-time interaction and prompted them to develop extensive preparation that sometimes exceeded what neurotypical-L1 colleagues appeared to practice. The elevated threshold was visible in text-based exchanges where accuracy tools alone could not absorb the cost. For example, although P14-D2 could use spell-checker to mitigate spelling difficulties in text exchanges with her advisor, the hierarchical relationship itself reactivated a self-checking cycle: *"With a teacher, the fear of making mistakes is a lot stronger... Before I send an email I check it over and over... Even after sending it I keep looking whether I wrote something ridiculous."* P18-AD2 felt relieved when her current lab switched to a casual WhatsApp group where *"people write in a rush, [make] typos."* Her dyslexia-related spelling difficulty no longer had to meet the formality threshold that emails to her previous advisor had imposed.

Confronted with these elevated expectations, participants became unusually meticulous in their work. P17-ADx developed a close-reading practice that made her more detail-oriented than her colleagues: *"Whether it's vocabulary, grammar, or spelling, sometimes my colleagues make mistakes, but I'm the one who catches them."* She maintained a notebook of her recurrent error patterns (e.g., letter reversals, missed letters, confusing visually similar words) so that on each new reading task she could mentally mark *"checkpoints"* to monitor. She contrasted this practice with her non-dyslexic colleagues: *"They don't care as much if they make a mistake. They think it's a one-off thing or a lack of focus that won't happen again."* Thus, the compounded pressures of dyslexia, L2 processing, and hierarchical accountability produced a vigilance that outperformed neurotypical peers but at substantial cognitive cost.

This meticulous preparation, however, depended on synchronicity where real-time verbal interaction compressed the processing window and forced participants to manage accuracy and speed at once. P15-D2 wrote down keywords before meeting with her advisor, since without them she could not *"squeeze out anything."* She also avoided asking for help on the spot during face-to-face interaction with teachers: *"I definitely can't think of a word and suddenly interrupt them. I'd just quietly write down [unfamiliar] words, look up the meaning after class... [although] I might forget by then."*

Advance preparation was not always possible, however. During a presentation Q&A, P8-A could handle prepared content but froze when his advisor asked unexpected questions: *"You first have to organize in your head how to say it, then think about whether you know all the words... Your brain can't keep up all at once."* The same process was *"much faster"* in Chinese, and the power differential eliminated the option of taking extra time. Interestingly, the compressed window produced the opposite response for P5-A. Under pressure, she spoke in *"very long, difficult sentences with many modifiers"* and *"consciously"* inserted connective words (*"so, because, but"*) to make her speech sound *"more logically rigorous... but actually, it's not."* She also felt an ADHD-driven urgency to respond immediately, treating any remark as *"a question or problem for me to solve"* that demanded a quick reaction. The same speech pattern registered as a harmless *"pet phrase"* in Chinese, yet her advisor had *"criticized many times"* her hurried, long-winded English responses and asked her to *"keep it simple."* Neurodivergent patterns thus became legible as problems only in English and only under the evaluative gaze of authority figures.

Participants developed strategies to protect the meticulous work the accuracy threshold demanded, although with uneven results. When her hospital director assigned asynchronous reading tasks, P17-ADx postponed her reply to gain processing time: *"I first check what the work involves, then for difficult parts or English content I use AI... When I understand about a third, then reply saying 'okay, received.' They think I'm just beginning, but I'm already a third done."* Timing the reply let her manage the extra time English decoding required while concealing her dyslexia. However, similar strategy backfired for P9-A, who procrastinated on advisor emails until deadline pressure forced action but then tried to *"polish"* responses to meet professional expectations. Here, ADHD-related task initiation difficulty, professionalism pressure, and English writing friction converged under the worst possible time conditions. Even P17-ADx's own vigilance was time-conditional. When deadlines tightened, the self-monitoring load became unaffordable, and the errors her *"checkpoints"* were designed to catch became more frequent. Thus, the meticulousness that sustained participants' competence was an active labor that compounded demands made simultaneously necessary and fragile.

4.3.2 ***Cultural Communication Norms.*** For participants with experience in both Chinese and Western settings, cultural communication norms partially relieved or sustained the cost hierarchy imposed on English communication, depending on whether the norms favored directness or indirectness.

In US institutions, what participants perceived as greater *"directness"* [46, 80] in communication norms, reduced the inferential labor that communication with authority figures demanded. P4-A shared that her US-based manager *"directly tells you, 'this point might not have met my expectations,'"* whereas in Chinese work culture *"you need to pick up on hints they give you"* [36]. The apparent *"straightforwardness"* (P1-A) of American authority figures lowered the rumination that ambiguous signals otherwise triggered for participants with ADHD. Similarly, P2-A observed that his American colleagues would request materials from a professor mid-conversation during lab meetings, whereas a Chinese context would typically defer such requests to a more formal follow-up email. This practice compounded his ADHD-related working memory challenges, because *"sometimes after meetings you forget what you originally wanted."* While directness was not uniform across all Western contexts, when applied, it functioned as a partial environmental accommodation that reduced the inferential load on neurodivergent cognition, though it did not eliminate the L2 processing costs participants faced.

Chinese cultural norms around teacher-student hierarchy produced another set of barriers. P2-A described being *"afraid of teachers since childhood,"* which persisted into graduate school. He traced this to his childhood experience in Chinese classrooms where certain ADHD-related traits were labeled as *"naughty"* (P2-A), *"disruptive"* (P8-A), or *"mischievous"* (P6-A) and subjected to disciplinary response. This left participants with a lasting wariness of teacher-student interaction that made the flat-hierarchy small talk of US academic settings feel unfamiliar. However, P6-A regarded this flatter hierarchy positively: *"[US] teachers are so gentle, you can go to teachers and say, 'I have this hardship in my life,' and they'd say, 'Let's sit down and talk about how to solve this.'"* For P6-A, the flatter

hierarchy and normalized help-seeking removed a communicative barrier heightened by neurodivergence and Chinese norms.

However, Western norms did not uniformly accommodate neurodivergence. P5-A preferred the precise deliverable-by-deliverable *"rhythm"* of Chinese academic supervision to her UK supervisor's open-ended conceptual debate, because ADHD productivity came in unpredictable bursts that external structure helped her capitalize on. P4-A reported the same pattern in US workplaces: *"In a more relaxed environment, sometimes I get distracted... since no one is pushing or watching me."* Thus, flexibility and structure each enabled and constrained different aspects of neurodivergent productivity, and neither was straightforwardly more accessible than the other.

4.3.3 ***Seeking Assistance through Strategic Disclosure***. Participants strategically navigated visibility as neurodivergent-L2 speakers. In some cases, they leveraged L2 status as a protective frame for masking neurodivergence; in others, concealing both identities left them with no means of requesting support.

In China, where neurodivergent conditions are severely underdiagnosed [83, 128], school and workplace accommodations remain limited in practice despite existing legal protections [14, 52, 57, 58]. Participants based in China navigated disclosure decisions carefully. P17-ADx concealed her neurodivergence from hospital leadership, recognizing that her reading speed directly affected her productivity and that exposure *"might get me fired."* Gender added another layer in disclosure decision for P12-Dx. She feared her advisor, whom she described as holding sexist views, could use neurodivergence disclosure against her: *"I was afraid that if I said too much, they might think I would drag them down."* Revealing dyslexia to an authority figure who already devalued her on gendered grounds risked compounding deficit framing across both dimensions.

P3-A shared how communicative adaptations can perform simultaneous accommodation work across L2 and neurodivergent dimensions without explicit disclosure. Unable to parse her Indian advisor's accent initially, they arrived at a multimodal workaround: *"He would say something, I couldn't understand. He would write it down, then I would connect the written word with his speech."* The advisor responded to her visible confusion (*"blank and confused big eyes blinking"*) by slowing his speech and passing handwritten notes during meetings. P3-A noted that her listening difficulty was not purely a matter of accent but also related to ADHD, as extended eye contact during conversation caused speech to *"flow out of my head"* like abstract symbols. With sustained cooperation from the advisor, the shift to handwriting addressed both the L2 gap and an underlying ADHD-related auditory-processing load, without either condition being named.

Others detailed how they masked neurodivergence behind L2 speaker identity. While studying in the US, P16-D2 found it difficult to read handwritten annotations on sheet music, but a disability stigma that equated learning difficulties with intellectual deficiency made him hesitate to request support from the professor directly: *"We Chinese people sometimes pretend to understand, or feel embarrassed to tell a professor we do not understand."* This was an intersection of culturally inherited reluctance to expose non-comprehension to authority and a learning disability-specific fear of being considered as cognitively deficient. Moreover, when asking classmates to type out handwritten annotations, P16-D2 deliberately masked his dyslexia behind the language barrier, presenting himself as a *"Chinese international student"* needing language-related assistance. The compounded challenge was made legible within L2 frame, where the perceived less-stigmatized identity absorbed the request.

P12-Dx pursued a parallel strategy by organizing peer reading groups within her philosophy major and framing it as a shared effort to improve English reading: *"Nobody knows it is because of my reading comprehension difficulty, but... everyone has problems with English."* She avoided naming her dyslexia-specific reading difficulties, which overlapped with a collective struggle around language. In turn, she contributed auditory strategies she had developed through years of compensating for reading difficulties, making the group a reciprocal space where she both gained and offered support without disclosure.

P9-A, however, inverted this politics of visibility. She concealed her ADHD in professional settings but actively maintained visibility as an L2 speaker and chose not to modify her accent as a form of identity work: *"I do not want to be seen as American."* She extended this position to redistributing the labor of communicative access: *"As a native speaker, you should spend effort to understand me, not me spending effort to make you understand me."* Here, maintaining her accent asserted cultural identity; refusing to absorb the comprehension burden asserted who owed effort in cross-linguistic interaction; and concealment of ADHD managed her professional impression. Together, these decisions illustrate a selective politics of visibility where participants negotiated which dimensions of their identity could be safely surfaced in which relationships, and on which party the work of accommodation should fall.

4.3.4 ***Institutional Accommodation Structures***. Participants who completed K-12 or undergraduate education in mainland China reported that no formal accommodation existed for neurodivergence. P5-A shared, *"In China, we don't have things like extra time for exams."* P2-A described an institutional Catch-22, where Chinese universities required sick notes from hospitals for short-term leave but the available leave categories were calibrated to brief physical illness or long-term withdrawal, with nothing between for intermittent neurodivergent needs. When he approached his counselor for a leave, the response was *"hang in there and get through it,"* an ableist stance that routed responsibility back onto the student regardless of condition.

The pedagogical environment also compounded the lack of accommodation. China's K-12 English instruction relied heavily on rote vocabulary memorization, which 11 of our 19 participants reported struggling with. This imposed high attention costs for neurodivergent learners without offering the contextual meaning they needed to anchor retention. In this environment, accommodation depended on individual teachers' willingness to diverge from standard pedagogy. P12-Dx's high school teacher redirected her away from rote memorization. For learning the word 'hospital,' the teacher asked her to *"think of a corresponding image (a cross symbol)"* and cluster related words (doctor, nurse, patient), which P12-Dx reflected gave her *"a much deeper impression of the word... I can form a deep memory anchor for it right away."* However, such ad-hoc accommodation relied on teacher goodwill rather than policy.

Institutional accommodation in Western contexts existed, but did not uniformly succeeded for our participants. The failure modes turned specifically on the neurodivergence-L2 intersection. P15-D2's Italian university provided formal dyslexia accommodations, yet the main option was converting written exams to oral exams administered by the instructor. She found this solution worse than the original problem, as oral exams demanded *"immediate output,"* whereas written exams permitted *"time to think through how to phrase something."* For a student whose dyslexia compounded with L2, the accommodation designed for L1-dyslexia reintroduced the very barrier it was meant to relieve.

P14-D2's university in Singapore offered support for students with documented learning disabilities, but she questioned whether her difficulties warranted accommodation at all, framing them as *"not that significant... a fairly common [Chinese] student problem."* Thus, P14-D2 assessed herself against an implicit threshold requiring her disability to produce experiences visibly distinct from those of her peers. When many Chinese students around her struggled with English-as-L2, the commonness of L2 difficulty supplied a comparative frame through which she disqualified herself from the accommodation category [56]. Paired with P15-D2's case, P14-D2's non-pursuit points to two failure modes of institutional accommodation for neurodivergent-L2 users: *form-mismatch*, where the available accommodation does not fit the compounded access need, and *legitimacy-erosion*, where the prevalence of L2 difficulty in one's peer group becomes a resource for self-disqualification from disability accommodation.

5 Discussion

5.1 Rethinking Compounded Access at the Neurodivergent–L2 Intersection

Prior work documents how L2 English speakers face difficulties [1, 54, 112, 130] against mainstream norms that position fluent English as the default of formality, respect, and life opportunities [68, 71, 97], and how neurodivergent individuals face difficulties in academic and professional settings [22, 32, 55, 92] when sociotechnical structures impose expectations of sustained attention [5, 32], fluent reading and writing [100, 118], and engaged communication [111, 131]. Recent HCI literature further shows that disabled individuals with intersectional identities create access by enacting different facets of their identities across different contexts [23, 30, 53]. Situated against this literature, we examine how Chinese students and professionals navigate English at the intersection of neurodivergence and L2 experience, where these demands produce *compounded access* needs, barriers, and responses. We discuss how these intersecting experiences can be recognized as assets in ways that uplifts neurodivergent–L2 speakers' agency.

5.1.1 ***Centering Neurodivergent–L2 Communication Traits.*** Mainstream norms treat fluency, speed, and immediate response as the default of *good* communication, relying on narrow binaries (eloquent vs. rough, quick vs. slow, competent vs. deficient) [23, 25] that get integrated into classrooms, workplaces, and technologies and perpetuate harmful assumptions about who counts as articulate or capable [32, 55, 77], while simultaneously privileging L1 and neurotypical communication patterns [3, 73, 86, 90, 127]. Within this dynamic, neurodivergent–L2 speakers are alienated not by neurodivergence or L2 status alone, but at the intersection of both. For instance, P8-A froze under unexpected advisor questions because organizing ideas, retrieving words, and answering quickly all at once, although manageable in Chinese, created cognitive overwhelm when done in English. P10-A described a parallel friction with the mainstream norm of conveying ideas *"concisely and efficiently with my advisor"* in English.

Addressing this begins with recognizing that communication patterns vary in pace, form, and language [101, 108, 119]. Coworkers, teachers, and advisors can attend to the substance of what is being communicated without reading longer phrasing or an L2 accent as reduced competence. Classrooms, meetings, and Q&A settings can make space for pause and delayed response, for example, by showing questions in writing first, allowing return after brief reflection, or accepting partial written answers, so that individuals are not penalized for needing time or alternative modes to organize and express their thoughts.

5.1.2 ***Recognizing Neurodivergent–L2 Learning Strategies as Assets.*** Neurodivergent and L2 ways of thinking and learning are not deficits to be corrected [6, 133] but assets shaped by lived experience [50, 84, 103]. The strategies our participants developed reveal pedagogical possibilities for L2 acquisition and everyday communication more broadly [124, 125]. Participants used Chinese translation as an intermediate layer [35] to build a high-level understanding in the language that felt easier to process before engaging the English text with lower attentional demand. P15-D2's synchronized read-aloud and visual tracking supported comprehension while reducing line-skipping, and P12-Dx's personalized audio vocabulary library scaffolded L2 learning through a dyslexia-friendly modality.

Learning environments can build on such strategies by supporting overview-first understanding through summaries, side-by-side translation, and layered engagement with L2 materials without presenting unfamiliar texts all at once. Cross-language ideation and drafting spaces [95, 108] can let learners draw on cultural references and linguistic features of their L1 (e.g., semantic and associative anchoring of Chinese) without requiring work in English from the outset. Assessment formats can likewise let learners demonstrate understanding without requiring polished English. Moreover, designers and educators can move away from English-centric defaults of existing learning resources [101, 119] by creating culturally inclusive material.

The assets-based framing [124, 125] also helps us rethink how neurodivergent–L2 work is evaluated. When strategies like template memorization or AI-assisted drafting—which participants developed to offset compounded access demands—produce writing that resembles AI-generated text, current detection-and-doubt practices in academic and professional settings consider these outputs as suspect [106]. Treating access strategies as evidence of misconduct is a form of ableism, which re-pathologizes the very adaptations through which neurodivergent–L2 writers meet normative expectations. P16-D2's reflection (*"turned myself into an algorithm"*) captures how this dynamic dehumanizes neurodivergent–L2 writers. Instead of defaulting to AI-detection tools, educators and evaluators can engage students in reflective conversations about how work

was produced, treating patterns that surface as potential access strategies as such rather than grounds for penalty.

5.1.3 ***Supporting Neurodivergent–L2 Intersectional Identity Expression.*** Prior work shows that neurodivergent individuals often avoid disclosure due to anticipated stigma [17, 32, 55, 91]. Our analysis extends this by revealing that when an individual holds both a neurodivergent and an L2 identity, one identity can serve to mask or navigate the risks tied to the other. P16-D2 framed his learning disability-related difficulty with handwritten English as an L2-support request, rendering the compounded challenge legible through the supposedly less-stigmatized identity. P3-A's Indian advisor noticed her confusion without formal disclosure and responded with slowed speech and written words. She potentially received this accommodation due to her international-student identity but it addressed both L2 and ADHD needs. P9-A inverted this pattern of disclosure: she concealed her ADHD but chose not to modify her English accent, actively maintaining L2 visibility as identity work [30, 65]. What may appear as masking or selective disclosure is often a calibrated response to the social conditions around each identity [30, 53].

The intersection can also shape identity expression through internalized ableism [56], where the peer context of L2 difficulty becomes the lens through which individuals may disqualify themselves from even pursuing disability recognition. P14-D2 identified as dyslexic based on her lived experience of reading difficulties, but she had not sought formal diagnosis. Measured against the visible L2 struggles of her Chinese peers in her graduate environment, she read her own experience as ordinary rather than disabling. Thus, when the two identities produce similar-looking behaviors, the more common identity can erode the perceived legitimacy of seeking support for the less common one. Moreover, the question of legitimacy is shaped by whose experiences are recognized as disability in the first place. Formal diagnostic systems are inaccessible to many [29], including those operating in cultures where diagnosis is rare, and those whose presentation is shaped by masking or by environmental accommodation. Self-disqualification can begin before the accommodation system is ever approached.

Support systems can accommodate flexibility by allowing individuals to request clarification, reading support, or alternative formats without declaring fixed identity categories such as international student or disabled. Support can also involve attentive noticing without formal disclosure. Educators, advisors, and supervisors can learn to notice patterns of strain and respond without requiring individuals to explain themselves, while remaining careful not to impose help where it is unwanted. Institutions can also recognize that the absence of formal diagnosis does not indicate the absence of disability, and that support structures which require documented diagnoses effectively exclude populations for whom diagnosis is linguistically, financially, or culturally out of reach. Creating informal and flexible access paths, such as accommodations based on demonstrated need rather than credential, can reach students that the documented-only model cannot.

5.1.4 ***Making Neurodivergent–L2 Labor Legible.*** Sociotechnical and organizational standards typically reward task outcomes [55], ignoring the "invisible" work disabled professionals must do to create access for accomplishing those tasks in predominantly non-disabled environments [11, 21, 22, 32, 107, 118]. Our participants performed extensive background work whose cost came specifically from the interaction of their neurodivergence and L2 status, e.g., advance preparation, cross-checking, language and modality switching, and error monitoring under authority-figure scrutiny. P17-ADx's close-reading practice exemplifies this compounded labor. She vigilantly tracked both dyslexia-typical errors and the L2 contexts in which they were most likely to occur, and this resulted in accuracy that exceeded her colleagues'; yet her sustained cognitive cost remained unreadable to her workplace. P5-A's case shows how invisibility produces consequential misunderstandings. ADHD-driven *"impulsiveness"* plus the extra processing required to produce clear English under advisor pressure led her to compensate with consciously structured, long sentences. Her advisor read this response as hurried and long-winded, missing the deliberate work of coordinating ADHD-related urgency with L2 output that in Chinese may not have been needed at all. Without a framework for recognizing invisible labor produced by the compounding of neurodivergence and L2, interlocutors read certain behaviors as signals of disengagement or incompetence rather than of effort expended to keep up [74, 86].

Making this labor legible calls for reciprocal communication between neurodivergent–L2 users and their interlocutors [18, 39, 89] without assuming preferences can be inferred from L1 and neurotypical defaults, especially in workplaces and academic settings where power imbalances constrain open discussion of support needs [22, 32]. This also means redistributing the labor of access to neurotypical/L1 interlocutors, as P9-A argued when she refused to neutralize her accent. Reflective environments [40, 122] can create safer space for such discussions through brief check-ins, feedback routines, and reflection prompts that surface effort already expended, current breakdowns, and needed support [1, 3]. Teachers and evaluators can encourage work visibility by letting learners preserve and share the path from L1 concepts to English output through draft history or reasoning checkpoints and assess where the real difficulty lies.

5.2 Design Considerations to Support Neurodivergent Individuals' L2 Learning and Use

Below we outline design considerations on the intersection of neurodivergence and English-as-L2 learning and use.

5.2.1 ***Use L1 Characteristics as Design Cues.*** Language-specific features like word-formation methods (e.g., compounding in Chinese, affixation in English) shape how learners process and engage with language [24, 116, 119]. Prior work designed technologies to address challenges faced by learners from specific backgrounds, e.g., using rhythmic vibration feedback to convey changes in English speech intensity, rate, and timing for Japanese learners [75, 116]. We propose that L1 characteristics can be used not only to explain L2 learning difficulties but also as design cues for addressing neurodivergent access needs. Learning tools can support multimodal anchoring by pairing an English word with its L1 (Chinese) translation, an image, a spatial layout, or a user-generated note.

Within-word structure can be made visible through syllable breaks, morphological grouping, stress markers, or customizable visual separators that prevent long letter strings from collapsing into visually indiscriminable chunks. Certain words (e.g., pelvis) whose Chinese equivalents (盆骨; basin-bone) appear to be decomposable and transparent while English equivalents seem opaque, can be supported through decomposition layers that surface root meanings, everyday paraphrases, and concept breakdowns alongside the unfamiliar term.

5.2.2 ***Enable Neurodivergence-L2 Specific Personalization.*** Prior work built tools to augment reading, writing, spelling, and visual attention, such as reading support through customizable typographic settings (e.g., font size, line spacing, background color) [48], unfamiliar-word detection [26], and in-message explanations [98], as well as writing support through proofreading [126] and phrase suggestions [13, 44]. However, these tools mostly cater to neurotypical learners [26, 98] or focus on isolated, task-specific challenges faced by neurodivergent learners (e.g., spelling, visual attention during reading) [48, 126]. In contrast, our findings suggest that tools need to move beyond pre-determined one-size-fits-all options [43, 53, 65] toward open-ended personalization that accommodates specific neurodivergent cognitive patterns alongside L2 support needs. At the presentation layer, tools can let users configure font, line spacing, column layout, and visual density, since our participants reported divergent preferences (e.g., some needed dense multi-column views to support ADHD-driven quick scanning while others found the same layout inaccessible due to dyslexia). Tools can also let users register their own error patterns (e.g., letter reversals, confusions between visually similar words) so that subsequent support targets those specific failure modes rather than generic L2 errors. At the content-pacing layer, tools can give users control over information density and progressive disclosure, such as how much text is presented at once, whether it appears in full or as an expandable summary, and whether dense content is paced to match variable attention budgets. Additionally, tools can allow fluid switching among modality configurations (audio-only, synchronized audio-plus-text, read-aloud with line tracking) depending on the task, and users can personalize further by attaching custom images, audio, or video clips to vocabulary items, or annotating emotional or semantic valence through user-defined color coding.

5.2.3 ***Promote Collaborative Activities for L2 Learning.*** Non-native speakers often rely on support networks to make sense of L2 content [3, 37]. Our findings reinforce the importance of collaborative, situated learning activities centered on real-life interaction rather than isolated syntax or vocabulary drills [1, 38, 47, 77]. Tools can let learners save, annotate, and revisit words encountered in real conversations such as class discussions, chat threads, or collaborative documents [78], and connect those words to new situations where they might apply. A complementary activity, sentence-frame remix, can allow a learner to first articulate an idea in their L1 and then collaborate with others to reframe it into English, building awareness of cross-linguistic translation issues along the way [106, 119]. Because not every learner has access to English-speaking peers, designers should foster the conditions for collaborative support rather than assume it is always available [1].

5.2.4 ***Account for Neurodivergent-L2 Specific Needs in AI Tools.*** AI tools help L2 speakers in during academic and professional tasks [13, 62], but their default input and output behaviors introduce distinct frictions for neurodivergent-L2 individuals [43, 65]. On the input side, effective prompting requires precise English terminology that may be difficult to achieve. Therefore, AI tools can detect likely terminology confusions, suggest candidate terms during prompt composition, and remember a user's discipline-specific vocabulary and recurring confusions across sessions so that disambiguation improves over time. On the output side, AI responses often serve as the user's initial entry point to dense English content, yet default formatting can introduce visual clutter and decisional overhead. Output can be made more accessible through layered presentation, such as selective expansion into supporting detail and on-demand cross-lingual translation of key English terms. However, designers should remain cautious that AI-mediated English support does not homogenize expression toward Western norms [2].

5.3 Limitations and Future work

Our participants were skewed toward those in higher education (12), female-identifying (14), and with ADHD or learning disabilities. This skewed sample may have partly stemmed from our recruitment approach which spanned our university-wide Slack channels and personal networks, among others (Section 3.1). Moreover, following prior work [28, 29], we accepted self-assessment of neurodivergence, and self-selection recruitment has been found to yield higher female participation [7, 109]. Future research can extend our work by including professionals outside academia, more gender-diverse samples, and other forms of neurodivergence.

While some of our findings are specific to Chinese linguistic and cultural norms, other findings are likely applicable to neurodivergent individuals navigating any L2 in professional or academic settings, such as using L1 as a cognitive translation layer, selective disclosure or masking of one identity behind another, and the compounding of L2 processing demands with neurodivergent cognition patterns. Future work can examine the intersection of neurodivergence with other L1–L2 pairings and cultural backgrounds beyond Chinese to identify which aspects of compounded access generalize and which are language- or context-specific.

6 Conclusion

Through our inquiry into English-as-L2 experiences of Chinese neurodivergent students and professionals, we document how neurodivergent cognition and L2 processing interact to produce access barriers, the strategies participants developed to navigate them, and the labor these strategies entailed, which were often misread as incompetence or disengagement. We introduce *compounded access* as an analytic framing to orient accessibility research toward intersections that single-axis analyses obscure. By centering this intersection as a distinct site of access need, we hope this work moves researchers, designers, and educators toward tools, pedagogies, and institutional practices that recognize neurodivergent-L2 expressions as learning and communication assets and redistribute the labor of access so that neurodivergent-L2 users are not the only party adapting.

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A Appendix

Table 1: Details of Interview Participants. Our study focused on ADHD, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. For these three conditions, participants had formal diagnoses except where marked with "self". Other neurodivergent conditions are listed as reported by participants. English proficiency: elementary (basic communication); intermediate (can handle everyday conversations); advanced (comfortable in most situations); fluent (can handle complex professional/academic tasks). Examples of technologies used for English learning and use: speech (e.g., text-to-speech, voice recognition, dictation); writing (e.g., grammar checkers, predictive text); reading (e.g., adjustable fonts, text highlighting, simplified text); visual organization (e.g., mind maps, concept diagrams, graphic organizers); AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or other generative AI tools). Participant P16-D2 completed undergraduate study in the US.

ID	Neurodivergent conditions	Current residence	English proficiency	English learning onset	English use frequency	Technologies used for English learning & use	Occupation
P1-A	**ADHD** (self), autism	US	Fluent	Kindergarten	Multiple times a day	Speech	PhD student
P2-A	**ADHD** (self), social anxiety	US	Fluent	Age 0-3	Multiple times a day	Writing	Student
P3-A	**ADHD**	US	Intermediate	Age 4-6	At least once a day	Writing; speech; reading	PhD student
P4-A	**ADHD**	US	Advanced	Age 7-12	Multiple times a day	Speech; reading	Software engineer
P5-A	**ADHD**, mild depression	UK	Advanced	Age 13-17	Multiple times a day	Writing; speech; reading; AI	PhD student
P6-A	**ADHD**, anxiety, mild depression	US	Fluent	Age 7-12	Multiple times a day	Reading; visual organization	Unemployed
P7-A	**ADHD**, depression	US	Advanced	Age 13-17	Multiple times a day	Writing; speech; AI	Unemployed
P8-A	**ADHD** (self), tic disorder	Canada	Advanced	Age 13-17	At least once a day	Speech; writing; reading; visual organization; AI	Student
P9-A	**ADHD** (self)	US	Fluent	Age 4-6	Multiple times a day	AI	Student
P10-A	**ADHD** (self)	US	Advanced	Age 7-12	Multiple times a day	Writing; reading; speech; AI	PhD student
P11-Dx	**Dyslexia** (self)	France	Advanced	Age 4-6	At least once a month	AI	Undisclosed
P12-Dx	**Dyslexia**	China	Intermediate	Age 7-12	At least once a day	Reading; writing; visual organization	Student, independent illustrator
P13-Dg	**Dysgraphia** (self)	Japan	Intermediate	Age 7-12	At least once a day	AI	AI engineer
P14-D2	**Dyslexia** (self), **dysgraphia** (self)	Singapore	Fluent	Age 7-12	Multiple times a day	Reading; AI	Student
P15-D2	**Dyslexia** (self), **dysgraphia** (self)	Italy	Intermediate	Age 4-6	At least once in six months	AI; reading	Student
P16-D2	**Dyslexia** (self), **dysgraphia** (self)	China	Advanced	Age 4-6	Multiple times a day	Writing; visual organization; AI	Teacher
P17-ADx	**ADHD** (self), **dyslexia** (self)	China	Elementary	Age 7-12	At least once a month	Writing; reading; speech; AI	Nurse
P18-AD2	**ADHD**, **dyslexia** (self), **dysgraphia** (self)	UK	Fluent	Age 4-6	Multiple times a day	Writing; reading	PhD student
P19-AD2	**ADHD**, **dyslexia** (self), **dysgraphia** (self), autism	Germany	Intermediate	Age 4-6	At least once a day	Speech; AI; reading	Student