

An Empirical Study on the Application of Continuation Task to English Writing Instruction among English Majors

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Abstract: “Continuation Task” is a method proposed by Professor Churning Wang with the purpose of improving students’ writing capacities by developing the uncompleted texts. The relevant research has been published in recent years and the results have showed that continuation-task method has a significant effect on improving students’ writing. Due to the lack of covering English majors as subjects, this study investigates 60 English majors’ writing performance by applying continuation-task on writing teaching. The result also proves that continuation task has a significant effect on improving English majors’ writing performance.

Keywords: continuation task; writing performance; English majors

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The College English Curriculum Requirements issued by the Ministry of Education in 2007 not only has strict requirements on listening, speaking, reading and translating on college students, but also puts forward a higher requirement on writing. However, writing has been a difficult part for second language learners no matter which stage they are in. Just like Nunan asserts that the most difficult thing in language is to produce a coherent, fluent and extended piece of writing [1]. Hyland believes writing is among the most important skills that the second language learners should develop and the ability to teach writing is of vital important to a well-trained language teacher [2]. Yet, present writing instruction is far off at best. There are lots of problems in students’ writing, ranging from vocabulary to structure and content. There are full of meager words with wrong use and grammatical mistakes in the compositions. The loose structures, the lacking of conjunctions, the ambiguous topic sentences can be observed here and there.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to find methods to ameliorate the present condition of second language writing instruction. Based on the relevant acquisition theories and output hypotheses, Professor Wang points out an effective writing method, continuation-task, to

combine reading and writing together [3]. The students are asked to read an uncompleted text first, and then use their own imagination to supplement. In order to fulfill the task successfully, students must read the source text intensively, analyze the writing features, and grasp the writer’s standpoint. Thereupon, they imitate and create their own and distinctive endings respectively. Since the students have been put into a reading-abundant situation, they can have good “interaction” with the writer of the text, and use the language in context appropriately. It should be highly noticed that this writing approach is a goal to be taught, as well as a tool to facilitate second language learning. However, few studies, especially empirical studies, show how to improve writing through continuation-task. Thus, it is necessary to explore the functions of the method and investigate the effects empirically.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The purposes of this study are to find out (1) Does continuation-task have significant effects on improving second language learners’ writing performance? (2) What is students’ attitude towards continuation-task method?

This study will employ quantitative and qualitative researches to collect overall data from students’ compositions as well as from the interview. Reading and writing are combined closely in this study. The students have an opportunity to learn more new knowledge from the source texts, and to immediately and creatively apply what they have read to supplement. In this study, the moderate source texts are chosen carefully to inspire students’ imagination and creation. It is hoped that students’ interest in ESL writing can be aroused and their ability of creative thinking can be cultivated. Additionally, it is also hoped that the findings of this study can provide pedagogical implications and serve as an indication to a need for further researches.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on Relationship between Reading and Writing

Reading is regarded as a receptive skill while writing a productive skill in the language learning, but they are closely related to each other. Reading and writing have

been considered to be related activities for long time [4-9].

Loban conducted a research about the development of students' reading and writing and the result demonstrated that there was a close relationship between reading and writing according to the test scores [10].

Woodford also conducted a correlational study involved 99 Japanese TOEIC test participants to indicate the relationship between reading and writing [11]. The proficiency of participants' reading, speaking and writing were tested separately. The results of the study indicated that reading strongly linked with writing. Therefore, he stated that reading could be a predictive factor for writing proficiency.

Hafiz & Tudor made a research about the integration of reading and writing [12]. The participants in the research were ESL learners in Leeds, UK whose age ranged from ten to eleven. The results showed that the learners benefited a lot from moderate reading materials and the significant gains in both reading and writing attributed to the integration of the two.

In China, the integration of reading and writing is regarded as an impactful method in L1 instruction, which has been employed for a long time. However, the integration of the two in foreign language instruction in China has been the exploratory stage.

By making a search on the relationship between reading and writing, Tsang Wai-king confirmed that reading could enrich linguistic knowledge of learners, help expand their writing content and enable them to be familiar with the structure, tense and expressions of the text [13].

In order to find an effective method to improve students' English proficiency, Wang made a research by means of guiding students to write long compositions [14]. His study was based on Second Language Acquisition Theory, and he also asserted that the internalization of language knowledge could be facilitated in the process of writing significantly.

Sheng conducted a research based on the efficiency of the integration of reading and writing in Jinhua College [15]. After analyzing the internal relationship between them, she drew a conclusion that effective reading enabled learners to significantly improve their writing ability.

The above-mentioned points indicate that both reading and writing are closely linked in language learning. Learners benefit from amount of language knowledge from reading which can lay a sound foundation of writing.

2.2. Definition of Continuation Task

In China, Professor Wang clarifies that the efficiency of second language learning depends on the effective integration of the comprehension and production to a large extent and the effect will be better if the integration is closer. It involves repeated application and imitation of the authentic expressions, which consolidate the learners' language knowledge and develops their learning ability. In the collaborative process, when a low-level learner

communicates with a high-level learner, his ability of applying language usually improves greatly. It is more likely that the comprehensible ability of the learner is much stronger than the production. So, the imbalance between comprehension and production derives from this kind of asymmetry. Because of the above reasoning, it is concluded that the learning method with the interaction of comprehension and production will promote language learning effectively.

However, in China, there are few opportunities for second language learners to interact with native speakers in their daily life, so it is urgent to seek an alternative way. The continuation-task method, put forward by Professor Wang in 2012, is a good way to improve learners' writing competence. He states that continuation-task is a new method to writing practice with the help of reading comprehension, in which students are given an incomplete text and finish the ending according to the above of the text freely and logically. Continuation-task method is not only because it combines comprehension and production tightly, but because it meets the features of learning environment, which provides more opportunities to read and write.

2.3. Related Researches on Continuation Task

Continuation task was put forward by Professor Wang in 2010, which was committed to improve English majors' writing proficiency. As a new teaching method of writing, based on reading-to-write, continuation task method values the importance of contextual knowledge instead of focusing only on grammar correction which was used to be the center in the traditional writing instruction.

With its local color, it deals with inappropriate expressions from the root of Chinglish. There are no official reports on continuation-task method at home and overseas. In China, under the leadership of Professor Wang, a large number of scholars have been performing a series of researches which achieved preliminary results and confirmed it is partial efficacy. The followings a brief introduction about two typical studies and their findings.

The first study researched whether continuation-task method produced synergistic effects on students' writing and how did synergistic effects affect students' writing. The results of test confirmed the reliability of assumptions: synergistic effects have a significant impact on learning and applying English. Native language transfer and them is match between English forms and Chinese contextual knowledge could be inhibited effectively in the light of continuation-task method. Consequently, the relatively authentic compositions with fewer language errors were written by students.

The second study explored whether the interestingness of reading materials impacted on continuation-task. The results demonstrated that the interestingness of reading materials closely related with writing performance closely. Instead of less interesting or boring materials, students are willing to read interesting materials and write the ending of the story. Notably, interesting reading materials generate more obvious synergistic effects which significantly reduce the rate of making errors in students'

writing. The above two typical researches demonstrate that it is vital for the synergistic effect to ensure learning efficiency which is what teachers expect and the synergistic effect immediately occurs in the application of continuation-task.

Other studies on continuation-task method mainly include a study of the continuation-task method as a proficiency test component, an empirical study of continuation-task method on English writing ability of high school students, an empirical study on the application of the continuation-task on English writing instruction, an investigation of continuation-task method, an empirical research of the synergistic effect of continuation-task method and so forth.

As a new method of writing, continuation-task method, with a long-term prospect, is still in the initial experimental stage, which needs to be promoted further and studied deeply.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The subjects in this research are 60 sophomores chosen from JiangXi Normal University. The ages of the participants range from 20 to 21, with the mean being 20.8. Of all the participants, 15 are males and 45 are females. One class with 30 students is assigned to be the experimental class (EC) while the other class with 30 students is assigned as the control class (CC). In order to ensure their liability of the research, extraneous variables are strictly controlled. Both EC and CC have same education levels and similar writing proficiency. Also, they are instructed by the same teacher. Both EC and CC have three English classes very week and the continuation-task method is applied in EC.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments in this study are two writing tests and an interview. Pretest and posttest were carried out to collect data on writing before and after the experiment. An interview was employed only in EC after the posttest to investigate the attitudes of English majors towards continuation-task method.

3.3. Research Procedures

The experiment lasted one semester (16 weeks). In order to analyze intuitively and conveniently, the research procedures were divided into three parts: pretest, treatment and posttest.

3.3.1. Pretest

In order to examine students' writing ability and to make sure there is no significant difference in their writing performance, a pretest is employed in the very beginning of the experiment. All the participants take part in the pretest to evaluate their writing proficiency. They were required to write the same topic "Online Shopping" about 120 words within 30 minutes, and these compositions are scored by two experienced teachers.

3.3.2. Treatment

The experiment lasted 16 weeks. The first and the last week were singled out for the pretest and posttest. During the experimental, both EC and CC were instructed by the same teacher with the same textbook, the only difference was the teaching methods. The continuation-task method was only applied in EC, while the conventional teaching method was adopted in the CC.

English Writing Instruction in Experimental Class

(1) Reading the source text

When students began to read the source text, they were required to scan the text to grasp the main idea in 15 minutes. Then they were asked to focus on various features of the source text, such as the key words, the topic sentence in paragraph, text structure and rhetorical expressions in case of omitting any important information. After reading, teacher would explain the difficult part in class in order to avoid obscurity in 5 minutes, and students could underline the part that they like or they are going to use in the following writing task. If having any questions, they could discuss with either the teacher or the classmates.

(2) Writing an opening end

The students were required to finish the uncompleted essay. Based on the source text, they could imitate the language and use their imagination to create their own endings as long as they can. They were encouraged to select, organize and correct from the text instead of mechanical imitation.

(3) Collecting and evaluating the students' compositions

The teacher assessed students' compositions and gave feedback as well as suggestions to the students about their compositions. According to the marking criteria set by Cohen, scores of compositions are based on the following standard: content (30 points), organization (30 points) and language (40 points), with a total of 100 points.

English Writing Instruction in Controlled Class

In the control class, the teacher used the tradition always of writing instruction without reading materials. Students were required to discuss the given topic in small groups about 15 minutes. It is worth noting that the topic discussed in CC was the same or similar as that of EC. Then, the teacher made a summary and gave some advice appropriately in 5 minutes. Meanwhile, some necessary writing skills and ways of developing the topic would be taught if necessary. Later, students needed to write a composition according to their discussion. After making an evaluation of students' works, the teacher also gave timely feedbacks and valuable suggestions to them.

3.3.3. Posttest

At the end of the semester, the post test was carried out in both EC and CC. All the subjects were demanded to complete another English writing test within 30 minutes in the regular class time. The requirements and details about the post test writing were the same as pre test writing which have been mentioned above. After the post test, anointers view about the students' attitude towards continuation-task method was given only in EC.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

At present, all the data from English writing tests were rigorously collected. Two raters evaluated all the subjects' compositions based on the marking criteria set by Cohen. Double-blind evaluation was employed to ensure the reliability of the scores. Each rater gave the score without knowing what score had been given by another rater. The final score of students was the average score given by the two raters. The study also supplemented the interpretation of the statistical findings by the qualitative data collected from the subsequent interview.

In this study, the researcher employed the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, version 21.0) to conduct statistical analysis of the data. The independent samples t-test was adopted to analyze the data collected from the pretest and posttest in EC and CC to answer the first question. The results from the interview were to answer the second question.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of Pretest and Posttest

In the beginning of the experiment, a pretest was carried out to find out whether the two groups were at the same or similar level. From the T-value (-.198) and P-value (.686) in Table 1, it is apparent that there is little difference of the two groups in pretest, which suggests that the students both in EG and CG are at approximately the same level in their writing capacities at the beginning of the experiment.

Table 1. Independent sample T-test results of pretest.

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
EC	30	76.2836	10.1038	-.198	.686
CC	30	77.1357	9.2687		

Table 2 shows that the mean of EC (84.5489) differs greatly from that of CC (80.2537). Standard Deviation is 6.2548 for EC and 5.3759 for CC. Sig. (2-tailed) is .017 which indicates that there is a significant difference in their scores of the posttest writing. In other words, the continuation-task method adopted in EC is a more effective way to improve English majors' writing.

Table 2. Independent Sample T-test Results of Posttest.

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
EC	30	84.5489	6.2548	2.2	.017
CC	30	80.2537	5.3759		

From statistics in the posttest, both EC and CC make progress on the total score, which means that both the continuation-task method and the traditional method are effective in improving students' writing. However, it is worth noting that compared with CC, the mean of EC is higher in the posttest, which increases from 76.2836 in the pretest to 84.5489 in the posttest. There is no doubt that a significant difference appears in the posttest between EC and CC. Students in EC wrote longer and more compelling compositions in the light of the new method.

Generally speaking, with the support of abundant contextual information in source texts, the compositions

in EC have more vivid details, less language errors and fewer Chinglish expressions than the compositions in CC. The results indicate that as a more effective method, continuation-task method is obviously superior to the traditional writing instruction in aspect of the total score.

4.2. Results of Interview

The interview was conducted after the experiment only in EC to inspect their opinions about continuation-task method as well as how continuation-task method can improve their writing. The five questions were asked to investigate the students' attitudes towards continuation-task method: (1) Do you think continuation-task method is helpful in your English writing? (2) If yes, in which aspects does it help to improve your writing? (3) If no, why don't you think it is effective to improve your English writing? (4) Through applying continuation task, do you realize you are more confident in writing than before? (5) In order to improve writing instruction, could you give some suggestions about employing the continuation-task method in our English class?

From the interview, we can know that most of the students think continuation-task method has positive effects on improving their writing. With the help of the source texts, the writing tasks become more interesting and less difficult. Meanwhile, they are more confident both in English writing and language learning. However, as a new method, the application of continuation-task method in this study still has several problems and many students also make their valuable suggestions on the future writing instruction. The following part is going to discuss it.

5. Implication

The results of the experiment obviously demonstrate that continuation-task method effectively improves students' writing in a large extent. From the results of this research, some pedagogical implications for the development of English writing instruction can be put forward.

5.1. Making Full Use of Textbooks and Reading Materials

It has been widely known that only when students acquire sufficient language input can they produce language output accordingly. Therefore, reading is playing an essential role in writing in construction by offering much language input supported by contextual knowledge and underlining the significance of language.

As handy source of language input, articles in textbooks are carefully and seriously chosen, they offer comprehensive and thorough information in various fields, which help students have a better master of language learning and broaden their horizon in general knowledge. Textbooks are full of authentic articles with rigorous argument, in which reading and writing can be well welded. For one thing, students can receive effect input from reading, such as information about content, rhetorical organization, contextual knowledge and use

full language forms. For another, as an essential form of output, writing can help students the awareness of linguistic features in input. Hence, teachers should integrate comprehensible and relatively interesting texts in books or extracurricular readings into their daily writing instruction. Meanwhile, teachers should value the materials and make them serve as a continuation task for students to write. During class, teachers can demonstrate with detail information in order to promote students' noticing of the content and organization and language, such as vocabulary, the proper grammar and classical sentence patterns.

5.2. Giving Timely Feedback

Receiving timely feedback from the teacher and peers is necessary to find out existing problems among teacher's instructing and students' learning, thus solving them in time. The main purpose of feedback is to motivate students' learning interest and facilitate them to learn effectively.

First and for most, teachers should provide students with moderate source texts with enough comprehensible input and encourage them to output effectively. When some students, who can only write some fragment sentences before, produce their compositions with relatively clear opinions and correct sentences as well as nice organization, they need more encouragement to build self-confidence. As a way of acknowledgement with their works, teachers' praise plays a vital part at this moment. Therefore, teachers should give instant feedback to students' achievements and the good compositions should be read and analyzed in class. In this way, these students can get the impression that they are acknowledged by teachers and peers. When they realize that their efforts put in write ignore not only for task but also for sharing writing experience with their peers, they may be more self-confident and have a willing to do better next time.

According to Fox, instead of teacher evaluation, peer evaluation also plays an important role. He argues that peer evaluation, to some extent, can alleviate much of writing anxiety originating from the fear of being evaluated and judged by the teacher [16]. Therefore, from this perspective, peer evaluation is just as important as teacher's feedback, if not more so.

5.3. Balancing Instruction and Practice

For the relationship between writing teaching and practice, English teachers lack a reasonable a wariness and control in a long term: some teachers spoon-feed their students with many rules and stereo types of writing, which makes them feel extremely bored; some teachers require students to practice writing assigned to pics repeatedly, leaving students in an awkward situation without sufficient resources. In the experiment, the students in EG read source texts first, which can guarantee target language input; after reading, students can continue the texts with their own distinctive endings. Although they still need to invest time, patience and perseverance in writing, the relative difficulties are

effectively reduced due to the comprehensible input from source texts. Therefore, students' writing enthusiasm is naturally kept and actively inspired.

In this way, writing is not viewed as an extremely difficult task as before, the group increase the amount of writing practice. In addition, analysis of the data indicates that some writing instructions can instantly influence students' English writing. For example, during the experiment, teacher lectures on the criteria of a good composition, showing the main purpose of writing, that is, to convey ideas with certain linguistic forms. Meanwhile, in the lecture the teacher gives encouragement and praise to the students who develop their continuation tasks with the words, sentence structures and cohesive patterns of source texts. In the post-test, the writing performance, including content, organization and language, is greatly improved, which indicates that students really benefit from these direct writing instructions.

6. Conclusion

This study is undertaken to explore the effects of continuation-task method on English majors' writing and to investigate the students' attitude towards continuation-task method. From the analysis of the data collected from two tests and an interview continuation-task method has appositive effect on English majors' writing on the whole.

During the 16-week period, students in EC significantly improve their writing. Students in CC also make progress in posttest, but the differences are not significant. The interview shows that students hold positive attitude towards the continuation-task method. Most of the students agree that the new method is much more attractive than the traditional English writing and it is really helpful in learning new words and improving their writing. They are willing to writing the endings through infinite imagination and relatively flexible imitation.

However, this study is just a trial experiment which contrives to provide preliminary support for the further development of English writing instruction. In order to achieve more overall and accurate results, the future study should apply multiple techniques with long periods and large samples. The continuation task method needs to be verified with more convincing search. Only by the further research can teachers promote the development of continuation-task method so as to help English majors to improve their writing competence.

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