

How to Help Senior High School Students Overcome English Writing Anxiety in Continuation Task Teaching

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the continuation task has various benefits for improving students' language proficiency, it may also lead to writing anxiety among students. This paper begins by explaining the concepts of continuation task and English writing anxiety, and subsequently analyzes the factors that increase students' writing anxiety from both teacher's and students' perspectives. To address this problem, this paper suggests three strategies: firstly, introducing mind mapping in continuation task teaching to aid students in understanding the story and constructing writing frameworks; secondly, enhancing students' familiarity with the topic to align with their interests and experiences; and thirdly, implementing Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment in continuation task teaching to establish a harmonious assessment atmosphere. These strategies aim to create a supportive writing environment for students, optimize the effectiveness of the continuation task teaching, and improve students' overall language proficiency by alleviating their writing anxiety.

Keywords

English Writing Anxiety; Continuation Task; Senior High School English.

1. Introduction

Writing ability is a key indicator of an individual's language mastery. It is not only a core component of language learning, but also a direct reflection of a learner's ability to use the language comprehensively. However, traditional English writing instruction in senior high schools often fails to activate students' interests and meet their individual needs, leading to a lack of enthusiasm for writing and stagnant writing skills among students (Wang Demei 2019; Zhang Yunqiao 2020). This situation underscores the shortcomings of traditional writing instruction in enhancing students' writing abilities and efficiency. Hence, there is an urgent need to explore new teaching methods to address this challenge.

In this context, Wang Chuming (2012) introduced the continuation task as an innovative teaching method that combines reading and writing skills. The continuation task, which requires students to creatively continue writing based on their understanding of a given text, demonstrates a significant effect in facilitating language learning. It enhances the quality of language outputs, particularly in terms of vocabulary richness, grammatical accuracy, and rhetorical expression (Jiang Lin & Chen Jin 2015; Jiang Lin & Tu Mengwei 2016; Xin Sheng 2017; Yang Hua 2018). In view of its unique advantages in enhancing writing skills, as well as the increasing requirements of the college entrance examination for students' English writing, the continuation task has become an integral part of English writing instruction in senior high schools. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the continuation task places higher demands on both teachers' teaching strategies and students' qualities, and inevitably exacerbates students' writing anxiety.

English writing anxiety, as a significant factor that influences learners' affective experience and learning effectiveness, may lead to students' avoidance of writing behaviors and hinder the language learning process. Despite the unparalleled benefits of the continuation task in enhancing language acquisition, its complexity might serve as a trigger for students' English writing anxiety, thereby diminishing their positive impact on learning.

This paper begins by introducing the concepts of the continuation task and English writing anxiety. It then delves into an analysis of the reasons why the continuation task may exacerbate students' English writing anxiety, examining perspectives from both teachers and students. Based on these factors, a series of effective strategies will be proposed to alleviate students' writing anxiety during the continuation task, ultimately fostering conditions conducive to the positive impact of the continuation task. The ultimate goal of this paper is to cultivate a healthier and more supportive writing environment that enhances students' language proficiency through engagement with the continuation task. Moreover, the paper aims to boost students' self-confidence in managing anxiety and overcoming challenges, equipping them with strategies to effectively cope with English writing anxiety.

2. Definition of Key Concepts

2.1. The Continuation Task

The continuation task, proposed by Wang Chuming, is a learning method that integrates reading and writing. He pointed out that this form of writing realizes three combinations, namely, the combination of language input and output, the combination of language imitation and creation, and the combination of language learning and application. Therefore, it is a good way to improve the efficiency of foreign language learning (Wang Chuming 2012). The design of the continuation task typically involves selecting a text suitable for students, such as a story, a science article, or a dialogue. It maintains the beginning and middle parts of the text while intentionally omitting the ending in order to stimulate the students' interest in reading and foster their creativity. On the basis of understanding the content of the text, students exert their imagination and creativity to extend the plot and complete the story reasonably (Wang Chuming & Qi Luxia 2013). The emergence of the continuation task has broken the boundary between reading and writing, making it a valuable tool for assessing language learners' comprehensive language skills. In recent years, this task has gained significant attention and is widely applied in language teaching.

2.2. English Writing Anxiety

English writing anxiety is characterized by the anxiety and behavior that foreign language learners display during the writing process (Daly & Wilson 1983). This kind of anxiety may impede the writing process, result in writing difficulties, and evoke negative emotions in learners towards writing tasks. Arnold (2005) states that anxiety plays a crucial role in language learning and is a major obstacle to effective language acquisition. In recent years, English writing anxiety has attracted the attention of more and more domestic and foreign researchers. Most researchers believe that English writing anxiety has a negative effect on writing performance, for example, Cheng et al. (1999) discovered a negative correlation between English writing anxiety and writing performance. Furthermore, Zhang Jiaqiang & Guo Li (2021) also emphasized that high writing anxiety significantly impairs both writing performance and quality. Therefore, reducing students' excessive writing anxiety is a key strategy to enhance the quality of writing, and efforts should be made to lower students' anxiety through various aspects of writing teaching.

3. Factors Increasing Student' English Writing Anxiety in Continuation Task

3.1. From the Teacher's Perspective

Teachers' methods and strategies in teaching the continuation task directly affect students' anxiety. As an innovative English writing form in the college entrance examination, the continuation task has significantly increased the demands on both high school English teachers and students. Consequently, numerous senior high school English teachers are struggling to discover effective teaching strategies to teach the continuation task and are encountering significant challenges in the teaching process.

If teachers prioritize reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar in the teaching of the continuation task, but neglect guiding students through the writing process, students may become confused and experience writing anxiety. This confusion typically arises from a lack of clear writing guidelines and techniques, leading students to resist the continuation task.

Additionally, teachers' unfamiliarity with the continuation task and their lack of teaching experience may also exacerbate students' writing anxiety to some extent. The uncertain and hesitant attitude of teachers can be conveyed to students, causing them to question both their writing ability and the guidance of the teacher, ultimately decreasing their confidence and motivation in writing. Furthermore, teachers may face additional challenges with the assessment system due to their lack of proficiency in understanding the scoring standards for the continuation task, as it is a newly introduced writing form. Relying solely on teacher feedback can be biased, diminish students' confidence and motivation, and raise their writing anxiety.

3.2. From the Students' Perspective

In senior high school English learning, the continuation task often triggers students' writing anxiety due to various reasons. Firstly, many students lack interest and motivation in the continuation task, and even resist it. This is largely caused by the fact that the topics of writing are often unrelated to their prior knowledge and schemata.

Secondly, the continuation task not only tests students' reading comprehension skills but also requires them to show creative thinking by incorporating personal insights and innovative elements while maintaining consistency with the style, plot, and topic of the text. Such high demand often causes some students to feel overwhelmed and anxious that their writing will not meet the expected standards.

In addition, the fear of external assessment often inhibits students' desire to write, as most students worry that their writing will be compared or criticized by teachers. As a result, the process of assessment after writing becomes an important source of anxiety for students, leaving them full of anxiety even before they begin writing.

4. Strategies to Reduce Students' English Writing Anxiety in Continuation Task

4.1. Applying Mind Mapping in Continuation Task Teaching

Mind mapping is a new thinking implement proposed by the well-known British psychologist and educator Tony Buzan in the 1960s. It is a visual and divergent thinking tool created in accordance with the radioactive characteristics of the human brain, which can present people's thinking process on complex problems through key words, lines, graphics and so on, promoting the visualization of thinking (Buzan 2005). A large number of studies have proved the effectiveness of mind mapping in English teaching, consistently demonstrating its positive impact on enhancing students' reading and writing skills.

In the teaching of the continuation task in high school, both Chen Huazhen (2024) and Ren Min (2024) pointed out the various advantages of applying mind mapping, including enhancing comprehension and memorization, stimulating creative thinking, clarifying the logic of writing, and fostering improvements in reading and writing skills. As a popular learning tool among students, mind mapping effectively guides them to refine the essence of the text and accurately grasp the direction of writing. This unique charm of mind mapping prevents the writing from disconnecting from the text, ensuring coherence and promoting creativity in students' writing. If students learn to use mind mapping as a tool to improve the quality of the continuation task, it will be beneficial for them to stay organized, enhances confidence, reduces writing stress, and alleviates writing anxiety.

4.2. Enhancing Students' Topics Familiarity of Continuation Task

Among many textual features, topic familiarity refers to learners' background knowledge and prior experience about on a specific topic (Bui 2014). Familiar topics can activate learners' existing knowledge and linguistic resources, aiding them in better understanding and processing new information while saving cognitive resources like working memory and attention, and then improve the quality of language output by reducing learners' perceived task complexity (Yang & Kim 2020). Therefore, being familiar with a topic significantly reduces learners' anxiety when writing in English, enhances the language learning process, and boosts output quality.

Gu Qiyi et al. (2022) explored the effect of topic familiarity on the continuation task through a comparative experiment and discovered that texts covering familiar topics are conducive to enhancing learners' attention and comprehension of the input. Moreover, these texts were found to generate alignment effects and facilitate language development more effectively. Therefore, in order to alleviate students' anxiety in the continuation task, teachers should choose reading materials that are close to their lives and interests, boosting the attractiveness and writability of the topic. By means of previewing the text and engaging in group discussions, students can mobilize their schemata and prior knowledge, thereby enhancing their comprehension of the text. This enables them to align the writing with their background knowledge, ultimately improving their confidence in writing and significantly reducing their writing anxiety.

4.3. Adopting Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment in Teaching Continuation Task

Because of the large class sizes and teachers' heavy workloads, students do not receive sufficient feedback on their writing in university. This not only discourages students' writing motivation but also hinders their writing skill development. To overcome this problem, Wen Qiufang (2016) proposed a novel assessment method called Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment (TSCA), in which teachers and students evaluate a typical writing sample through cooperation. In order to promote the comprehensive development of students' writing abilities, TSCA integrates evaluation within the learning process. This integration is achieved by prioritizing teaching quality and the achievement of teaching objectives through a variety of assessment methods, which include teacher assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment, and automated writing evaluation.

In senior high school, TSCA demonstrates a strong adaptability in teaching the continuation task, leading to an obvious improvement in students' overall scores (Huang Fukang 2023). Meanwhile, the use of TSCA in the teaching of the continuation task creates a relaxed and harmonious learning environment, greatly promotes the interaction between teachers and students as well as among students, and significantly reduces students' pressure and anxiety. During moments of confusion, students can promptly turn to teachers or classmates for help,

effectively alleviating anxiety while writing. In brief, TSCA has effectively alleviated students' stress, decreased avoidance of writing due to anxiety, and fostered a more positive and healthier attitude towards writing among students.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the continuation task is considered a challenging and innovative writing form in the college entrance examination. This places considerable writing pressure on numerous high school students, consequently triggering a widespread sense of writing anxiety. As a result, students frequently adopt avoidance strategies, which affects their writing engagement and the quality of language output. To cope with this situation, this paper explores the reasons why the continuation task induces anxiety in learners of English writing. It then focuses on a series of solutions aimed at mitigating students' anxiety and optimizing the writing process. These strategies are intended to establish a more systematic and reasonable guidance for high school English writing instruction, thus fostering a positive, harmonious, and conducive learning atmosphere for writing. By implementing these strategies, English teachers can effectively reduce students' mental burden and anxiety when they face the continuation task. This reduction in anxiety allows teachers to further stimulate students' writing potentials, and ultimately, it leads to improvements in students' language use ability, boosting the comprehensive language development among students.

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