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The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on High School Students' Writing Anxiety in Continuation Writing

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is reshaping English writing instruction, offering new possibilities for alleviating senior high school students' anxiety in continuation writing tasks. Grounded in control-value and sociocultural theories, this study positions AI as a "cognitive partner." Through in-depth interviews with 12 students, the research reveals that AI mitigates anxiety by enhancing perceived control via three pathways: cognitive load sharing, immediate feedback regulation, and positive emotion activation. However, AI use may also trigger new forms of anxiety, including dependence, evaluation, and value anxiety. Students expect clear rules, personalized support, and autonomy preservation. Accordingly, the study proposes four pedagogical pathways for human-AI collaboration: teacher role transformation, boundary setting, differentiated intervention, and value clarification. It emphasizes that AI is not a substitute for teachers but a cognitive partner, and that the key to alleviating anxiety lies not in the technology itself, but in the mode of human-technology collaboration.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Continuation Writing; Writing Anxiety; Human-AI Collaboration; Pedagogical Pathways.

1. Introduction

As an important question type in the National College Entrance Examination English, reading continuation requires students to understand a given text and continue the story's development. It assesses not only linguistic competence but also imagination and logical thinking. Nevertheless, this task also causes significant writing anxiety among students. Surveys show that more than 60% of senior high school students experience moderate to high levels of anxiety when completing reading continuation tasks, mainly manifested as "not knowing how to construct a plot", "worrying about logical inconsistency with the original text", and "fearing errors in language expression". Writing anxiety not only impairs students' immediate performance but may also form long-term emotional barriers, weakening their motivation and confidence in English learning.

Since 2022, generative artificial intelligence represented by ChatGPT has swept across the field of education, bringing unprecedented changes to English writing teaching. Students have begun to use AI tools to complete writing tasks, while teachers face the challenge of guiding students to use AI appropriately. This transformation offers new possibilities for alleviating anxiety in reading continuation: AI can provide plot suggestions when students struggle with conception, linguistic support when they encounter expression difficulties, and immediate feedback after they finish writing. Such an "intelligent scaffolding" can theoretically reduce the cognitive load of writing and enhance students' writing self-efficacy.

However, the intervention of AI has also raised new concerns: Will students become over-reliant on AI, leading to the degradation of their abilities? How to respond when AI recommendations conflict with teacher evaluations? Does the use of AI constitute "cheating" or

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"academic misconduct"? These issues indicate that the relationship between AI and writing anxiety is not a simple linear causality, but a complex system involving individual differences and teaching contexts.

This paper attempts to construct a theoretical analytical framework for artificial intelligence in alleviating senior high school students' reading continuation anxiety. On this basis, it explores how teachers can guide students to form a collaborative relationship with AI, so that technology can truly serve the emotional and academic development of students.

2. Theoretical Lenses

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1. Control-Value Theory: Dual Appraisals in Anxiety Generation

Pekrun's [7] control-value theory posits that academic anxiety is determined by two core cognitive appraisals: control appraisal (perceived control over learning activities and their outcomes) and value appraisal (subjective judgment of the importance of learning activities and their outcomes). Anxiety arises when individuals perceive low control over a task while attaching high value to it. Pekrun and Perry[8] further note that academic emotions exert a reciprocal influence on learning motivation and strategies, forming a cyclical feedback mechanism. A cross-cultural study by Goetz et al.[5] confirms the stability of this theory across diverse educational contexts.

In the writing context, Cheng[1] divides second language (L2) writing anxiety into three dimensions: cognitive anxiety (fear of negative evaluation), somatic anxiety (physiological tension), and avoidance behavior (tendency to evade tasks), with cognitive anxiety being the most central. A meta-analysis by Woodrow[16] reveals that writing anxiety is negatively correlated with self-efficacy and positively correlated with perceived task difficulty. In reading continuation writing, students' anxiety stems from dual uncertainties: lack of control over plot development and linguistic expression, while the writing task itself carries high stakes. The lower the sense of control and the higher the perceived value, the greater the level of anxiety. This theory provides a foundation for understanding how AI alleviates anxiety: technological support that enhances perceived control can reduce anxious experiences.

2.1.2. Sociocultural Theory: Writing as a Mediated Activity

Vygotsky's[13] sociocultural theory emphasizes that the development of human psychological functioning is inseparable from the mediation of cultural tools. Symbolic systems such as language and writing are tools that mediate mental activity. Lantolf and Thorne[6] introduced this theory to L2 acquisition, arguing that learners internalize social relations into psychological functions through interactions with tools and others. Wertsch's[14] concept of "mediated action" highlights that tools both empower and constrain the possibilities of action.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a key concept for understanding writing instruction, referring to the gap between a learner's actual level of independent problem-solving and their potential level of problem-solving with assistance, Vygotsky[13]. Building on this, Wood, Bruner, and Ross[15] proposed the concept of "scaffolding"—supportive interventions provided within the ZPD that should be gradually removed as learners' abilities improve. Swain[11] applied this theory to L2 writing, putting forward the concept of "languaging"—the idea that mediating thought through linguistic expression is a crucial mechanism for L2 development. Sociocultural theory also draws attention to the duality of tools. Salomon[9] points out that humans and tools should form a relationship of "mutual dependence" rather than one-way reliance. If learners passively accept tool outputs instead of engaging in dialogue with them, tools become external devices that replace thinking, leading to cognitive offloading.

ISSN: 2688-8645

2.1.3. Psychological Mechanisms of Reading Continuation Writing

The core psychological mechanism of reading continuation writing is the alignment effect, Wang[20]. When learners write after reading a source text, they unconsciously imitate the text's linguistic expressions and stylistic features, achieving interactive alignment with the text. Wang [21] further specifies that this alignment occurs at two levels: linguistic and situational—learners must construct a mental representation consistent with the original text to produce a logically coherent continuation.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, Flower and Hayes'[4] cognitive model of writing identifies three core processes: planning, translating, and revising, which compete for limited cognitive resources. Reading continuation writing reduces the burden of content generation by providing a source text as a "pre-understanding" foundation, allowing learners to allocate more cognitive resources to linguistic expression. An empirical study by Wang and Wang (2014) found that the alignment effect significantly improves linguistic accuracy and promotes the acquisition of target language forms.

However, reading continuation writing does not fully eliminate anxiety. A study of senior high school students by Zhang[17] found that reading continuation anxiety mainly manifests in three forms: plot construction anxiety, linguistic expression anxiety, and evaluation anxiety. Xu and Zhao[24] introduced the concept of flow experience, finding that flow is most prominent in reading continuation tasks and serves as a key predictor of performance. While anxiety cannot independently predict writing performance, it interacts with flow to exert joint effects.

2.2. Research on L2 Writing Anxiety at Home and Abroad

Second language writing anxiety refers to the feelings of tension, worry, and fear experienced by learners when writing in a second language. Since Daly and Miller[2] first proposed the concept of "writing anxiety", this field has become an important topic in second language acquisition research. Foreign research has mainly focused on the measurement, effects, and alleviation strategies of anxiety. Regarding measurement tools, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng[1] classifies anxiety into three dimensions: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior, which has laid the foundation for subsequent studies. In terms of effects, numerous studies have confirmed that writing anxiety is negatively correlated with writing performance, Sabti et al.[10], and learners with high anxiety show poorer linguistic accuracy. As for alleviation strategies, scholars have proposed various interventions including strategy training, online writing, and reading continuation writing (Tsiriotakis et al.[12].

Domestic research started relatively late but has developed rapidly. Guo and Qin[18] revised the Chinese version of the SLWAI and verified its applicability among Chinese English learners. As li[19] sited studies have found that low self-efficacy, excessive self-evaluation, and fear of negative feedback are major causes of writing anxiety. Regarding effects, studies consistently show that writing anxiety negatively predicts writing performance. Research on alleviation strategies is particularly abundant; scholars have explored the effectiveness of process-genre pedagogy, cooperative learning, affective intervention, reading continuation writing and other approaches, Wang [20].

Reviewing domestic and international research, the following characteristics and limitations can be identified: most studies focus on college students, with insufficient attention to senior high school students; studies mostly concentrate on the correlation between anxiety and writing performance, with inadequate exploration of the dynamic mechanism of anxiety; with the integration of artificial intelligence into education, the impact of technological factors on writing anxiety urgently requires in-depth investigation. Based on these gaps, the present study focuses on senior high school students and explores the mechanism of AI intervention in reading continuation tasks on writing anxiety.

ISSN: 2688-8645

2.3. Research on the Application of Artificial Intelligence in L2 Writing

With the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence, the application of AI in second language writing teaching has attracted increasing attention. Li[19] proposed a framework for GenAI literacy, covering four dimensions: basic knowledge, effective use, output evaluation, and ethics. In terms of teaching models, Dong et al. constructed an integrated model of "data-driven learning and generative AI", confirming that it can significantly improve students' discourse structure, content quality, and writing efficiency.

Regarding feedback research, AI has advantages in providing immediate and personalized feedback, especially in dealing with surface-level issues such as grammar and vocabulary, but has limited effects on improving advanced skills such as coherence and argumentation. Studies show that AI feedback can form a synergistic effect with teacher and peer feedback, promoting learners' diversified interaction and deep processing.

However, the application of AI also brings challenges: over-reliance may lead to the decline of independent writing ability, and ethical issues such as subtle plagiarism and ambiguous authorship have become increasingly prominent. Luo et al. advocate positioning AI as a "mediating actor" in the teaching ecosystem rather than a substitute for teaching.

Reviewing existing studies, the application of AI in L2 writing mostly focuses on feedback mechanisms and teaching model construction, while research on the impact of AI intervention in reading continuation writing on writing anxiety among senior high school students remains scarce. The present study is conducted to fill this gap.

3. Enabling Mechanisms: Three Pathways of AI to Alleviate Writing Anxiety

Based on the theoretical framework above, we identify three core pathways through which AI alleviates anxiety in continuation writing. These pathways are not isolated but intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

3.1. Cognitive Load Sharing: From Bearing to Collaborative Coping

Continuation writing is a cognitively demanding task. Students need to handle multiple processes simultaneously: understanding the original plot, predicting story development, organizing linguistic expressions, and checking grammatical errors. These tasks compete for limited cognitive resources, and anxiety arises when the total load exceeds an individual's capacity.

AI intervention changes this situation. When students encounter obstacles in conception, they can ask AI for plot suggestions: "What might happen next if the protagonist chooses to stay?" The two or three plot directions provided by AI reduce the cognitive load of content generation. When students struggle with expression, they can seek linguistic support from AI: "How do I say 'he felt both surprised and confused' in English?" The expression options offered by AI lower the cognitive load of linguistic translation.

A senior two student described this experience in an interview: "I used to fear getting stuck most when doing continuation writing. I couldn't think of what to write next and just felt anxious, and the more anxious I was, the less I could think. Now I can ask AI for ideas. The suggestions it gives may not be used directly, but they open up my mind and make me think, 'Oh, it can be written this way.' The feeling of being helpless and alone has decreased a lot."

This quote reveals the affective significance of cognitive load sharing: what matters is not how perfect AI's suggestions are, but that students feel they are "not fighting alone." Such an experience of collaborative coping is itself an effective intervention against anxiety.

ISSN: 2688-8645

3.2. Immediate Feedback Regulation: From "Delayed Judgment" to "Process Calibration"

In traditional writing instruction, students often have to wait for days to receive teacher feedback after completing a task. This delayed feedback creates two problems: first, students remain in a state of uncertainty during the wait ("Is my writing good or not?"); second, the temporal and spatial separation between feedback and writing weakens its effectiveness.

Immediate feedback provided by AI transforms this model. Students can obtain feedback at any time during the writing process and adjust their work promptly. One student described:

"After finishing a paragraph, I can ask AI to check for grammatical errors or whether it connects coherently with the previous text. It tells me where problems might be, and I can revise them right away. I don't have to wait until I hand it in to know how I've done. That vague, uncertain feeling is much better."

From the perspective of control-value theory, immediate feedback enhances process control. Students are no longer passive "recipients" waiting for evaluation, but "controllers" who can actively adjust their writing. This increased sense of control directly alleviates evaluation-related cognitive anxiety.

3.3. Positive Emotional Activation: From "Anxious Experience" to "Flow Experience"

Anxiety in continuation writing is often associated with the fear of being judged—worry about losing points for illogical plots, being criticized for linguistic mistakes, or being laughed at by classmates for poor performance. Such concerns about negative evaluation occupy mental space and prevent students from engaging fully in writing itself.

As a non-judgmental interactive partner, AI creates a safe writing space for students. AI does not mock students' expressions, nor does it give low scores for weak writing; it only offers suggestions and responds to questions. The establishment of this sense of security encourages students to experiment and express themselves more willingly.

More importantly, after AI helps students overcome obstacles in conception and expression, students are more likely to enter a state of flow—complete engagement in writing, loss of track of time, and enjoyment of creation. Xu and Zhao[24] confirmed that flow experience is most prominent in continuation writing tasks and serves as a key predictor of performance. Although anxiety cannot independently predict writing performance, it interacts with flow to exert joint effects. This suggests that the ultimate goal of alleviating anxiety is not the absence of anxiety, but allowing positive emotions to dominate, so that students experience the joy of growth through writing.

4. Hearing Students: Qualitative Evidence on AI and Writing Anxiety

However, AI is not a panacea. Improper use may give rise to new forms of anxiety, an issue we must face squarely when discussing AI-assisted writing.

4.1. Overview of Interview Design

To gain an in-depth understanding of students' authentic experiences in AI-assisted continuation writing, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Grade 11 students. The interviewees covered three levels of English proficiency (high, intermediate, and low, four students in each group) and varied AI usage habits. The interviews centered on three core questions:

(1) How has your anxiety changed when using AI?

(2) In what ways has AI helped you relieve anxiety?

(3) What expectations or concerns do you have about AI-assisted writing?

ISSN: 2688-8645

4.2. Core Findings: AI and Anxiety in Students' Eyes

Table 1. Core perceptions of AI in alleviating CWT anxiety (n=12)

Core Dimension	Core Viewpoints	Typical Quotation	Frequency
Cognitive Support	AI provides plot inspiration and linguistic models, easing anxiety in conception and expression	"When I get stuck, I ask AI; its directions help me keep thinking."	11/12
Emotional Safety	AI's non-judgmental nature and instant feedback create a safe writing space	"AI won't laugh at my poor writing; I can ask any question."	9/12
Instructional Expectation	Expect clear teacher guidelines, personalized AI support, and maintained autonomy	"If the teacher clarifies when AI can be used, I won't have to use it secretly."	8/12
Dependency Anxiety	Worry about over-reliance leading to weakened abilities and "lazy thinking"	"Will I still be able to write well without AI in exams?"	7/12
Evaluation Anxiety	Fear of being labeled as "cheating" and conflicts with teacher evaluations	"The teacher didn't say if AI is allowed, so I use it secretly, feeling nervous."	6/12

4.3. Theoretical Interpretation of Qualitative Findings

4.3.1. Alleviation Paths: Enhanced Control and Anxiety Reduction

Interviews show that AI alleviates anxiety through three paths, whose core mechanism is the enhancement of a sense of control.

At the level of cognitive support, AI directly addresses students' dilemmas of "not knowing what to write" and "not knowing how to write" by providing plot inspiration and linguistic examples. As one student stated: "I used to stare blankly at the screen halfway through, not knowing what to write next. Now I ask AI, and its directions help me keep thinking." The value of AI does not lie in providing "correct answers", but in breaking "mental impasses" and helping students regain control over the writing process.

At the level of emotional support, the non-judgmental nature of AI creates a safe space. One introverted student admitted: "I dare not ask questions in class for fear of being laughed at by classmates. But I never feel that way with AI; it never thinks my questions are childish." This sense of security shifts students from "fear of making mistakes" to "willingness to try".

At the level of process control, AI strengthens students' sense of control over the progress and quality of writing. One student described: "Now after finishing a paragraph, I ask AI to check my grammar. It doesn't write for me; it helps me revise. I feel more like a 'director', and AI is the 'consultant'." This active status constitutes the core source of a sense of control.

4.3.2. New Anxieties: Evidence from the Shadow Zone

Nevertheless, while easing existing anxiety, AI has also triggered new forms of anxiety. Dependency anxiety stems from concerns about declining abilities. As one student noted: "After using AI for a while, I have become mentally lazy. Before, I would try to rephrase what I could not express; now I just ask AI directly. What will I do in exams?" This anxiety reflects the tension between increased short-term control and weakened long-term control. Evaluation anxiety arises from ambiguous teacher attitudes. One student admitted: "My teacher never said whether AI is allowed, so I use it secretly and feel nervous every time I submit my work." When AI use remains in a gray area, students cannot treat it as a learning tool but only as a cheating device, thus intensifying anxiety.

Value anxiety touches the essence of writing. One student commented: "Although AI's writing is smooth, it never feels like mine. When I write on my own, the plots are my creation, and I feel a strong sense of achievement." This points to the core value of writing as subjective expression: where is the "self" when AI intervenes?

ISSN: 2688-8645

4.3.3. Usage Expectations: A Call for Pedagogical Guidance

Students hold a dialectical attitude toward AI. They expect AI to provide personalized support ("I hope AI can give suggestions based on my level") and teachers to clarify usage rules ("If the teacher clarifies when AI can be used, I won't have to use it secretly"). More importantly, they desire to maintain autonomy: "AI is a helper, but it cannot think for me." Such clear self-awareness lays the foundation for a healthy human–AI relationship.

4.4. Summary

Students' voices reveal the complex relationship between AI and anxiety: AI relieves anxiety by enhancing perceived control, yet may also generate new anxieties concerning dependency, evaluation, and value. The core implication of these findings is clear: whether AI can truly become a cognitive partner depends on how it is integrated into the learning activity system and how teachers respond to students' real needs.

5. Pedagogical Pathways: How to Guide Students use with AI

Based on the above analysis, we propose three core pathways for teachers to guide AI-assisted writing.

5.1. Role Transformation: From "Judge" to "Collaborative Designer"

After AI enters the classroom, the teacher's role needs to be repositioned. In traditional teaching, teachers are designers of writing tasks and judges of writing products. In AI-assisted contexts, teachers need to become designers of human–AI collaboration—designing how, when, and why students interact with AI. Specifically, teachers need to:

First, clarify the role of AI. Explain to students that AI is a cognitive partner rather than an answer provider. Encourage students to treat AI as an object for dialogue, questioning, and reflection, not just a tool for passive instruction. Second, design norms for human–AI interaction. When can AI be used? What kinds of help are appropriate? How can AI be used to enhance learning rather than replace it? These norms require discussion and consensus between teachers and students. Third, model productive dialogue with AI. Show students how to ask high-quality questions, evaluate AI responses, and further develop their own thinking based on AI suggestions.

5.2. Boundary Setting: Distinguishing "Scaffolds" from "Crutches"

Table 2. Staged Scaffold Mechanism for AI-Assisted Writing

Fading Scaffold Mechanism for AI Use		
Initial Stage (Scaffolding Support)	Developing Stage (Gradual Release)	Mature Stage (Reflective Practice)
Heavy reliance on AI	Independent writing first, then AI consultation	Reflective dialogue with AI
Building writing confidence	Fostering independent writing ability	Cultivating critical thinking

The intensity of AI intervention should be dynamically adjusted according to students' developmental levels. The key is to help students distinguish between scaffolds and crutches:

Scaffolds are temporary supports that help students complete tasks they cannot accomplish independently and can eventually be removed. Crutches are permanent substitutes; the more they are used, the weaker students' abilities become. Accordingly, teachers should guide students to establish a fading scaffold mechanism for AI use.

ISSN: 2688-8645

5.3. Differentiated Intervention: Responding to Diverse Needs of Students

Students at different proficiency levels have different needs for AI, and the effects of AI intervention also vary. Teachers need to implement differentiated strategies:

For low-proficiency students, AI mainly provides linguistic support and expression models to help them overcome barriers such as "having nothing to say" and "being unable to express ideas", and build basic confidence in writing. For intermediate-proficiency students, AI mainly offers plot inspiration and structural advice to help them make breakthroughs and develop more advanced narrative abilities. For high-proficiency students, AI can serve as a partner for reflective dialogue—comparing their own ideas with AI suggestions, analyzing strengths and weaknesses, and developing critical thinking.

5.4. Value Clarification: Returning to the Original Meaning of Writing

The value anxiety revealed in student interviews — "Although AI-generated writing is fluent, it never feels like my own" — points to the core issue of writing education in the AI era: when technology is capable of text generation, how can the subjective value of writing be maintained? The answer to this question lies in returning to the humanistic essence of writing activities.

English writing is not merely a process of encoding linguistic forms, but a practical activity through which learners achieve self-expression and cultural identity construction via a second language. For Chinese senior high school students, the reading continuation task carries dual values: the integrated application of language abilities, namely transforming input discourse knowledge into output, and the cross-cultural expression of narrative thinking. Although AI systems can generate grammatically correct and logically reasonable continuation texts based on corpora, they cannot replace the unique experience learners obtain in second language expression — the sense of achievement from "telling my own story in a foreign language", which is precisely the most effective antidote to second language writing anxiety. When students independently conceive plots and deliberate over words and sentences, they are not only practicing language, but also confirming their second language subjectivity: "I can express my ideas in English." The establishment of such subjectivity cannot be endowed by technology, and it constitutes the humanistic foundation of foreign language writing instruction.

Based on the above understanding, teachers should guide students to realize a paradigm shift in AI use: from an instrumental "template orientation" to a reflective "mirror orientation". The former regards AI as a model for imitation, leading to passive dependence and the dissolution of subjectivity; the latter takes AI as a cognitive mirror for self-reflection, deepening the understanding of one's own expressive characteristics through comparative analysis of differences between human and AI texts. Qualitative evidence confirms this shift: some students point out that "when I write by myself, the plots are created by me, the sentences are chosen by me, and I feel a strong sense of achievement after finishing" — this sense of achievement precisely stems from the confirmation of subjectivity. At the operational level, teachers can guide students to conduct reflective comparisons through three questions:

First, the linguistic dimension — Is AI's expression more accurate than mine? Second, the cognitive dimension — Is my conception more creative than AI's? Third, the integrative dimension — How can I learn from AI's advantages while maintaining my personal style? These three inquiries form a cognitive path from "technology at my service" to "subjectivity within my grasp", helping students establish a dynamic balance between technological assistance and autonomous expression.

6. Conclusion: Reflecting at the Boundary

The introduction of artificial intelligence into the English writing classroom is not a revolution to be resisted or embraced, but an evolution to be understood and addressed. Based on an

integrated perspective of control-value theory and sociocultural theory, this study explores the mechanisms and pathways through which AI alleviates senior high school students' anxiety in reading continuation writing, and reveals the opportunities and challenges brought by technological intervention.

The core conclusion is: AI is not merely a technical tool for relieving anxiety, but a cognitive partner that reshapes the writing relationship. Whether it can truly help students depends not on the sophistication of technology itself, but on how it is integrated into students' learning activity systems, how teachers guide students to collaborate with it, and how students strike a balance between technological assistance and independent development.

Anxiety is essentially a response to uncertainty. The emergence of AI has brought new uncertainties, but also new possibilities. When we no longer regard AI as a threat or a savior, but as a partner with whom we can dialogue and grow collaboratively, anxiety shifts from an obstacle to be eliminated into a signal to be understood. It reminds us that at the boundary between human and technology, there are fundamental questions to reflect on: What is learning? What is writing? What is human growth? Reflections on these questions may be more important than any technology itself.

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