



A Review of the Evaluation of the Continuation Task

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ABSTRACT

The continuation task is a new type of writing that organically combines reading and writing. It provides new ideas for English writing teaching. It creatively combines language input understanding with output writing, which can effectively improve students' writing skills. This paper reviews different ways of evaluating "the continuation task" and outlines related research, aiming to provide suggestions for future teaching practice of its evaluation.

Keywords: the continuation task, multiple evaluations, evaluation criteria

Introduction of the Continuation Task in the Chinese College Entrance Examination

The college entrance exam is an extremely important test for Chinese students that determine their future destiny. The continuation task is a new type of writing testing in the college entrance examination, which organically combines reading and writing. In China, reading and writing have been in a disconnected state for a long time, that's why the invention of it. Although Xie discussed the interaction between reading and writing as early as 1994, it is still difficult to implement in daily teaching practice. However, this phenomenon has been changed since 2016, when "the continuation task" was included for the first time in the Zhejiang Provincial College Entrance Examination. The emergence of a test type is determined by the demand of the testing, but whether it can be widely promoted or not depends on the reliability, validity, authenticity, interactivity, washback effect and operability of the test (Zou, 2011).

In the new English curriculum standards, students are expected to develop the core competence of the English subject: language competence, cultural awareness, thinking competence, and learning competence. Accordingly, "the continuation task" integrates the four aspects of the subject core competence: the first step is to read the material, in which students naturally acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge and thus improve their learning competencies; the next step is to write the ending rationally and creatively based on the content of the material, a process that mobilizes students' thinking competencies, language knowledge and cultural knowledge. The Zhejiang Provincial College Entrance Examination demonstrated the positive washback effect of this writing test, which can indeed improve learners' comprehension output in terms of linguistic accuracy and complexity (Jiang & Chen, 2015). Since then, Shandong and Hainan Province have successively included the test type in the 2020 Summer College Entrance Examination, which aims to examine students' comprehensive language application skills. In early 2021, eight provinces (Liaoning, Guangdong, Hebei, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Fujian, and Chongqing) also implemented this test type in the exams. More and more provinces have acknowledged that this type of test can effectively measure students' reading and writing abilities, and more and more researchers have begun to study it.

1. The Continuation Task

The continuation task means "reading before writing", which is a method combining reading comprehension and writing training, and is similar to "reading for writing". This theory was formally proposed by Professor Wang in China in 2012 mainly based on the "Interactive Alignment Model". He believes that "the continuation task" is an effective way to improve the efficiency of foreign language learning. As the core theoretical basis of "The continuation task", the "Interactive Alignment Model" assumes that both parties in the communication process coordinate the two contexts to trigger language-level alignment and ultimately to the exchange of information (Atkinson, 2007). This alignment is not limited to people, but can also be between people and society and other things. Because of this feature, Wang (2012) extended the concept of alignment to the interaction between the second language (L2) learners and reading materials and developed "the continuation task".

There are other theoretical bases for “the continuation task” besides the “Interactive Alignment Model” and the “The Length Method”. For example, Krashen’s (1982) “comprehensible input” argues that the language input should be a little above the learner’s current level to facilitate language acquisition. Later, Swain (1985) added that the improvement of learners’ language ability requires a lot of practice in “speaking” and “writing”. Based on these theories, “the continuation task” was developed, in which learners are given a piece of reading material that lacks an ending, and after understanding the material, students need to complete the ending according to their feelings and imagination. This is an alignment among reading and writing based on their understanding of reading material, where the learner interacts with the input reading material which in turn triggers an alignment between reading and writing.

2. Concepts and Theories Related to Writing Evaluation

2.1 Writing test

Writing is a cognitive process that Flower & Hayes (1981) divide into three parts: planning, translating, and reviewing. The theory of writing tests is one of the most important branches of language testing, and three representative methods of testing writing ability emerged in the 20th century, namely, the indirect method, which is based on multiple-choice questions, the direct method, which is based on instantaneous essays, and the portfolio method (Zhang, 2009).

The indirect method tests students’ scattered writing skills in the form of multiple-choice questions, which in turn infer the students’ linguistic writing skills. However, although this method can test students’ writing ability to some extent, it does not reveal the integrity of the writing process and the complexity of individual perceptions.

The instant essay is the most direct and most common method of testing English writing, and it is mostly used in college entrance exams, where the topic composition is the most common, and the chart composition and the letter are also common forms of writing in college entrance exams. However, this direct writing test also has its limitations, as it is difficult to express the students’ true feelings and to mobilize students’ comprehensive language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in a time-limited test.

The portfolio is the most rational way to test writing, but the portfolio is difficult to implement in high schools with heavy classroom pressure due to its time-consuming limitations. Moreover, multiple revisions of the essay do not fully demonstrate the student’s true writing ability. For this reason, portfolios are generally not used in large-scale, high-stakes testing.

Recently, “the continuation task” has become a new favourite in high schools as a writing test. It is a continuation of the reading material without an ending and requires learners to continue writing logically and consistently. It meets the requirements of the General Senior High School Curriculum Standards for the English writing category, where students can understand the meanings, intentions and emotional attitudes conveyed by different types of discourse, analyze the structural features and linguistic characteristics of different discourse types, and be able to convey opinions and attitudes in oral or written form (General Senior High School Curriculum Standards 2017 Edition, 2020).

2.2 Evaluation-related concepts

According to different functions of evaluation, they can be divided into diagnostic evaluation, formative evaluation and summative evaluation, which evaluate teaching before, during and after respectively; according to different evaluation subjects, they can be divided into self-evaluation, teacher evaluation and peers’

evaluation; according to different analysis methods, they can be divided into the quantitative evaluation and qualitative assessment; there is also a classification of evaluation into learning process-oriented evaluation and learning resource-oriented evaluation.

Regarding the specific scoring methods for writing testing, there are three scoring methods: “primary trait scoring, holistic scoring and analytic scoring (Li & Kong, 2011)”. “Primary trait scoring” is pertinent, but the score does not have a universal meaning and is mostly used for scoring the writing of the native language. “The holistic scoring” is that the scorer gives an overall impression of the text to be evaluated. “The analytic scoring” evaluates different aspects of the text in scores, then add them together to give a whole writing score. In the second language writing test, the drawback of the analytic scoring is greater than that of the holistic method. Of course, there are pros and cons to each type of evaluation, and it is important to integrate multiple evaluation methods and apply them creatively in daily teaching.

Evaluation is a kind of assessment of strengths, weaknesses and values. Extending its concept to writing evaluation means that the evaluator makes a value judgment on the student’s writing process and results through certain evaluation criteria based on the curriculum objectives, and finally achieves the goal of educational value-added Activities (Fu, 2010). The evaluation should be based on relevant evaluation standards. Moreover, in the theoretical system of language testing, the scoring standard of writing tests has always been the focus of researchers, especially for some large-scale high-risk exams, such as the college entrance examination. The college entrance examination writing tests a person’s comprehensive language ability through direct written expression, which is a comprehensive test and has a high test validity. Due to the strong subjectivity of writing scoring, scoring errors will inevitably exist. Although a scoring standard with fairness, objectivity and high reliability cannot eliminate scoring errors from the source, it is one of the main factors to control scoring errors.

3. Review of research on the Continuation Task

Although “the continuation task” has become one of the test types of the college entrance examination, it has not been fully promoted to the whole country after all, so there are not many relevant articles about it, not to mention the evaluation. As of May 26, 2021, there are a total of 45 papers on CNKI with the themes of “the continuation task” and “evaluation”. In the four years after Wang published his first related paper in 2012, there were only a few scattered papers, but in the second half of 2016, the research on “the continuation task” increased rapidly, and the corresponding articles on the evaluation of it also gradually increased, which was more or less influenced by the Zhejiang Provincial College Entrance Examination. After screening out some irrelevant studies, I found that the articles on “evaluation of the continuation task” can be divided into two categories: evaluation as a teaching process and evaluation criteria.

3.1 Evaluation as a teaching process

Since the continuation task is a new type of teaching method, many scholars have focused on the teaching process of reading and writing. As a part of the teaching process, evaluation is also a natural object of study. Although all of them treat evaluation as a process of teaching, different scholars have different views.

Among them, the application of the multiple evaluation model (Xuemei, 2020; Xu, 2021; Zhang, 2021) has been accepted by most people. By “multiple”, we mean using various evaluation methods, such as students’ self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment after completing their writing, which is also called “teacher-student cooperative evaluation”. This kind of teacher-student collaboration emphasizes a dynamic interaction, forming a closed-loop between teaching, learning, and feedback, also called “dynamic interactive evaluation” (Pu & Wang, 2017; Shi, 2020).

This process is usually a direct evaluation of the work by the evaluator. However, it is time-consuming and laborious for a teacher to evaluate dozens of essays from the whole class, and it is easy for he or she to get tired and overlook many of the students' mistakes. Therefore, the use of various tools on the Internet is a good way to ease the teacher's burden, such as the application of writing evaluation software, iWrite (Song, 2019& Wang, 2021), which makes full use of the advantages of timely feedback and detailed mistakes of machine evaluation. This is another multiple evaluations, which combined with teacher evaluation will double the feedback effect. This combination of manual and machine evaluation makes the washback effect of the Continuation Task greatly improved. In addition to specialized writing assessment software, WeChat groups (Shi & Huang, 2021) have also been turned into a new pattern. Although the use of WeChat groups also combines self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment, the WeChat group-based writing assessment method adds a touch of fun to students compared to the tedium of traditional forms of assessment. In fact, whether it is iWrite or WeChat group, it is a deep integration of traditional writing and information technology.

Achieving an integrated teaching-learning-evaluation model requires not only diversified evaluation but also rich classroom evaluation methods (Yu, 2020). Classroom evaluation needs to choose different evaluation methods according to the learning content and goals of the classroom, such as "selective response assessment", which refers to examining students through objective questions such as multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions, "expository assessment", which is based on the teacher's open-ended questioning, "communicative assessment", which evaluates various ways of communication between teachers and students, and "performance assessment", which refers to the evaluation of students' skilful performance and achievements.

3.2 Evaluation criteria

Whether the evaluation criteria is reasonable has a lot to do with the improvement of learners' ability to continue writing. However, there are two different views on evaluation criteria. One view is that reading and subsequent writing must be based on certain evaluation standards. This evaluation standard should pay attention to the content structure, language expression, logical thinking and emotion of the continuation (Zhang, 2017, Wang, 2019), and more importantly, focus on innovative evaluation and feedback methods.

Therefore, Wang (2019) creatively adopted the SOLO theory as a way to evaluate continuations' content richness and consistency with the original style. According to the theory's classification of students' cognitive development, he similarly classified students' continuation into five levels: "pre structural level, uni-structural level, multi- structural level, relational level, and extended abstract level". These five levels represent the different levels of task completion from incomplete to creatively completed, with an increasingly better fit to the original text and more plausible plot development. This type of evaluation has also been applied to daily teaching (Li, 2021).

However, Yan (2020) disagreed. In his opinion, "effective evaluation" should be emphasized in the Continuation Task. Solidified assessment criteria are inappropriate for reading and writing tasks that are highly flexible, and different learners have different perspectives and opinions on such highly flexible work. If a solid assessment approach is adopted instead, it will stifle learners' creativity. In daily training, the focus should be on observing students' creativity and performance so that they can gradually develop into creative writers.

4. Conclusion

On the whole, most of the studies on the evaluation of "the continuation task" have focused on students' output work, while neglecting the evaluation of reading materials. In fact, input and output go hand in hand in "the continuation task", and are equally important in improving students' overall language skills. Therefore, the

evaluation of input materials should be included in the future to promote the integrity of the evaluation of reading and subsequent writing. In addition, there is little empirical research on the evaluation of reading and writing from a theoretical perspective.

In terms of evaluation as a teaching and learning process, researchers have focused on “multiple evaluation models”, which are mostly from the perspective of evaluation subjects, including students themselves, peers, teachers, and machines. However, the factor of the grader in the entrance examination is ignored, so more evaluation subjects including the grader in the entrance examination should be included in the future. In addition, most current studies focus on the formative evaluation of students in the teaching process, and fewer researches focus on diagnostic and summative evaluations. So future research can start from multiple perspectives and promote the diversity of evaluation.

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