

Middle School English Writing Instruction: The Integrated Practice of Scaffolding Theory, Formative Assessment, and Peer Feedback

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Abstract: This study focuses on middle school English writing instruction, systematically analyzing the existing problems in current teaching and proposing targeted improvement strategies. The research points out that middle school English writing instruction faces numerous challenges, including students' weak foundational knowledge, insufficient discourse awareness, negative transfer from the mother tongue, and insufficient emphasis on writing by teachers. These issues seriously affect students' writing abilities and enthusiasm for learning. To address these problems, this study proposes a variety of optimization strategies, such as strengthening the consolidation and application of basic knowledge, focusing on discourse coherence and linguistic richness, paying attention to cultural differences to reduce the negative transfer from the mother tongue, and effective teacher guidance in students' writing. In addition, the application of scaffolded instruction, formative assessment, and peer feedback has been proven to significantly enhance students' writing abilities and learning autonomy. The results show that an integrated approach using multiple strategies is more effective than a single strategy and can better meet the diverse learning styles and needs of students. This study aims to provide valuable references for middle school English writing instruction, helping students build a solid foundation in English writing during their middle school years and lay a good linguistic basis for their future learning and development.

Keywords: Middle School English; English Writing Instruction; Scaffolding Theory; Formative Assessment; Peer Feedback

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, English, as an international lingua franca, plays a vital role in cross-cultural communication, international trade, and international education. With the continuous deepening of China's opening-up policy, the importance of English in the national education system has become increasingly prominent. The middle school stage is a crucial period for students' English learning. The cultivation of their English writing ability is not only related to their English learning outcomes during the middle school stage but also has a far-reaching impact on their future English learning and international communication skills in their career development.

However, current English writing instruction in middle schools is confronted with numerous challenges. On the one hand, the English learning foundation of middle school students during their primary school years is highly uneven. Some students have significant deficiencies in vocabulary accumulation, grammar mastery, and language sense development, which makes them feel overwhelmed when facing English writing tasks in middle school^[1,2]. On the other hand, the traditional English writing teaching model often focuses excessively on grammar explanation and vocabulary memorization, neglecting the cultivation of writing thinking and the stimulation of writing interest. As a result, students lack proactivity and creativity in the writing process. Moreover, some teachers do not pay sufficient attention to English writing instruction, and their teaching methods are monotonous, lacking effective guidance and feedback on students' writing process, which also to some extent restricts the improvement of students' English writing ability.

In recent years, with the continuous renewal of educational concepts and the diversification of teaching methods, an increasing number of studies have begun to focus on the improvement and innovation of English writing instruction in middle schools. For example, the application of scaffolding theory in writing instruction has provided more effective writing support for students, helping them gradually build up their writing ability^[3]. Meanwhile, cooperative learning strategies such as peer

feedback have been proven to significantly enhance students' writing ability and learning autonomy^[4]. These studies have provided new ideas and methods for English writing instruction in middle schools and also offered theoretical basis for teachers to explore more effective writing teaching strategies in teaching practice.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the existing problems and their causes in middle school English writing instruction. Based on current educational theories and practical research findings, it proposes feasible improvement strategies. It is hoped that this study will provide useful references and insights for middle school English writing instruction, helping students lay a solid foundation in English writing during their middle school years and build a strong language ability base for their future learning and development.

2. Problems in Middle School English Writing Instruction

The middle school stage is a crucial period for students' transition from basic education to higher-level learning, with the primary goal of laying a solid foundation for their future English studies. However, due to the complexity of middle school English writing instruction and the individual differences among students, the current teaching of English writing in middle schools faces many challenges. On the one hand, middle school students are just beginning to engage with English writing and are still unfamiliar with certain words, sentence patterns, and grammatical structures, and their writing abilities need further improvement. On the other hand, there are disparities in the level of primary school English classroom teaching. Some students, after entering middle school, reveal many problems in their writing studies due to an insufficient foundation in English during their primary school years. These students often feel at a loss when writing in English, finding it difficult to complete an article that meets the word count and thematic requirements within a short period of time, let alone produce outstanding compositions with highlights and high scores.

In summary, the difficulties in middle school students' English writing are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.1 Middle School Students' Inadequate Mastery of Basic English Knowledge

English writing is not merely a simple accumulation of words, but rather an organic integration of vocabulary, grammar, tenses, and other elements. However, middle school students often have a weak grasp of basic knowledge during the writing process. This is specifically manifested in insufficient attention to verb tenses, inflexible use of non-finite verbs, frequent spelling errors, and misuse of singular and plural forms as well as grammatical structures.

As a language system, English differs significantly from Chinese in its construction. For example, certain grammatical structures and expressions in Chinese correspond to different constructs in English. The extent to which students master these basic elements directly affects the level of their writing.

In primary school English teaching, teachers often focus more on vocabulary accumulation and assessment, while paying relatively less attention to writing practice. This leads to a weak writing foundation for students when they enter middle school. Additionally, due to limited exposure to English, students have not yet developed a good sense of the language, making them feel unfamiliar and ill-adapted during the learning process. Some students even struggle with memorizing words and using phrases and collocations properly, resulting in poor learning outcomes. For students with weaker foundations, mastering knowledge points that other students can easily handle becomes particularly challenging, further exacerbating their difficulties in English writing.

2.2 Middle School Students' Weak Discourse Awareness in English Writing

In English writing, coherence and smoothness of sentences are fundamental requirements. However, middle school students often neglect this key element. This is specifically manifested in the lack of coherence in the content, unnatural transitions between sentences, and even sentence fragmentation or incomplete endings. These issues not only affect the overall quality of the article but also reflect deficiencies in students' logical thinking abilities.

Logical thinking ability is closely related to English writing proficiency. For students who have not been widely exposed to English reading, they are less familiar with English expression habits and grammatical rules, making it difficult for them to construct coherent English sentences using the

vocabulary and phrases they have learned. Moreover, the complexity of English grammar, such as tense variations and diverse sentence structures, further increases the difficulty of writing. These factors collectively contribute to students' confusion in the writing process, making it challenging for them to achieve the desired level of writing proficiency.

2.3 Middle School Students' English Writing is Significantly Influenced by the Mother Tongue

Middle school students are exposed to the Chinese language from a young age, while their English learning typically begins in primary or middle school. Due to a lack of systematic understanding of the differences between English and Chinese, students often experience interference from their mother tongue when writing in English. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the differences between cultural backgrounds and language habits. English and Chinese have significant differences in expression habits and logical thinking. For example, some students are accustomed to planning their English writing based on Chinese expression patterns, or even completing the content in Chinese first and then translating it word-for-word. This "Chinglish" writing style not only restricts students' writing abilities but also risks solidifying poor writing habits, which can pose potential problems for future learning^[5].

In the English writing of middle school students, Chinglish is a common issue, manifested in the simple juxtaposition of words and improper use of word order. For example, students might write "a study room" instead of "a study," or neglect the consistency of subjects in complex sentences. These errors reflect students' unfamiliarity with the connotations and expressions of the English language. This phenomenon is not only evident at the vocabulary and grammar levels but also extends to differences in discourse structure and cultural connotations. English writing emphasizes directness and clarity, while Chinese tends to focus on indirect expression and gradual semantic development. Therefore, to improve middle school students' English writing abilities, it is essential to help them understand the differences between English and Chinese in form and connotation and to cultivate their cross-cultural awareness and English thinking skills.

2.4 Insufficient Emphasis on English Writing Instruction by Teachers

In the middle school English teaching system, the proportion of English writing is relatively low, with the teaching focus often concentrated on the explanation of grammatical knowledge to lay a foundation for students' future English learning. However, the level of English writing skills developed during the middle school stage and the writing habits formed have a profound impact on the continuous development of students' writing abilities in the future^[6]. Regrettably, in current middle school English writing instruction, teachers' investment in writing guidance is relatively insufficient. They often simply require students to memorize model essays to prepare for exams, rather than systematically explaining writing methods and techniques. This teaching model leads to students' over-reliance on imitation in the writing process, lacking the ability for independent thinking and innovative expression.

In daily teaching, teachers pay little attention to writing issues, usually just asking students to memorize excellent model essays, and rarely providing in-depth explanations of writing ideas, structural layout, and the diversity of language expression. Moreover, due to the tight schedule of middle school courses, teachers often have no time to focus on the cultivation of students' writing and translation abilities, which further exacerbates the weakness of students' writing skills^[7]. Over time, students are likely to develop a fixed mindset in writing, making it difficult for them to adapt to diverse writing demands and thus affecting the comprehensive development of their English writing abilities. Therefore, systematic guidance in English writing by teachers during the middle school stage is crucial. They should place greater emphasis on writing instruction to help students develop good writing habits and enhance their overall writing abilities.

3. Strategies for Middle School English Writing Instruction

English writing is an important manifestation of comprehensive language use. It not only examines students' mastery of vocabulary, tenses, and grammar but also poses high demands on their logical thinking and organizational abilities. To enhance students' English writing proficiency and enable them to achieve high standards in accuracy, fluency, and coherence, teachers can optimize writing instruction strategies from the following aspects:

3.1 Strengthening the Consolidation and Application of Basic English Knowledge

In middle school, the range of tenses and grammatical structures involved in English writing is relatively limited. However, many students struggle with writing due to an insecure grasp of grammatical knowledge, leading to non-standard use of grammar. Grammar, as the core foundation of English writing, is crucial for improving the quality of compositions. Both syntactic structure and grammatical details are key elements in evaluating writing proficiency. Moreover, various question types in English exams clearly require a solid understanding of grammar, further highlighting the importance of grammar instruction^[8].

Traditional grammar teaching methods often rely heavily on classroom lectures, which can easily lead to student fatigue and diminish their interest in learning grammar. To effectively enhance students' grammar proficiency, teachers should break through the limitations of traditional teaching models and adopt diverse teaching methods. In addition to classroom explanations, post-class practice is equally important. Teachers can organize a variety of grammar practice activities to help students consolidate their knowledge. More importantly, teachers should guide students to apply grammatical knowledge in daily communication, allowing them to experience the use of grammar in real contexts through oral practice. This approach helps students truly master the essence of grammar and appreciate the charm of English grammar^[8].

3.2 Focus on Discourse Coherence and Linguistic Richness

A common issue in middle school students' English writing is the lack of discourse coherence. Discourse coherence involves not only the logical flow of content but also the smoothness of expression. Specifically, paragraphs within an essay need to be closely connected through effective cohesive devices to ensure a clear structure and prominent theme. According to Halliday and Hasan's theories of cohesion and coherence^[9], cohesive devices mainly include reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. The application of these devices in middle school English writing can effectively enhance the coherence of the essay and also test students' comprehensive ability to use English words and grammar.

However, discourse coherence is only one aspect of writing proficiency. To improve the overall quality of their compositions, students also need to focus on linguistic richness. Linguistic richness is reflected in the diversity of vocabulary, variation of sentence patterns, and the use of rhetorical devices. Teachers can guide students to memorize and accumulate excellent English sentences and paragraphs, and apply them appropriately in their writing to enhance the expressiveness and appeal of their essays. Through this approach, students can not only improve their writing skills but also develop their sense of language and aesthetic ability in English.

3.3 Pay Attention to Cultural Differences and Reduce the Negative Transfer of the Mother Tongue

The problems faced by middle school students in English writing are not limited to spelling mistakes and grammatical errors; more commonly, there is a "Sinicization" of sentences. This phenomenon stems from the significant differences in thinking patterns and language expression between English and Chinese. For example, students often mistakenly write "a study room" instead of "a study," reflecting their unfamiliarity with English expression habits. At the syntactic level, English complex sentences emphasize the smoothness of language and the consistency of the subject, while Chinese is relatively flexible, with inconsistent subjects in main and subordinate clauses not affecting the understanding of meaning. In terms of discourse structure, English writing tends to be straightforward, usually placing key points at the beginning of a paragraph or essay, following the principle of "getting straight to the point." In contrast, Chinese, influenced by thinking patterns, often lays the groundwork first and places the main content or key issues at the end or implies them within the text.

Therefore, middle school students need to pay full attention to cultural differences and reduce the negative transfer of their mother tongue when writing in English. Research indicates that integrating cultural content into English writing courses can effectively enhance students' language skills and strengthen their cross-cultural understanding and global awareness^[8]. Teachers should focus on guiding students to understand the cultural connotations of English and Chinese languages, and cultivate their English thinking ability to help them avoid expression errors caused by cultural differences in writing.

3.4 The Guiding Role of Teachers in Students' Writing

In middle school English writing instruction, the guiding role of teachers is of vital importance. Teachers should employ diversified teaching strategies to systematically guide students in improving their writing abilities. Specifically, teachers can help students gain a deep understanding of the linguistic characteristics and expressive techniques of English writing by explaining excellent model essays, analyzing their grammatical structures, and comparing the cultural differences between English and Chinese. These measures can not only effectively enhance students' writing proficiency but also cultivate the accuracy and fluency of their language expression.

For students with weaker foundations, teachers should provide more attention and patience, carefully analyzing their deficiencies in learning methods and logical thinking. Through personalized communication and guidance, teachers can help them gradually overcome difficulties in writing. Teachers should design writing tasks that progress from simple to complex, based on students' actual writing levels, to ensure a smooth transition in difficulty. Through this gradual teaching approach, teachers can steadily develop students' writing abilities and self-confidence, avoiding the discouragement that may arise from overly difficult tasks or stringent requirements.

Moreover, the interest and interactivity of the English writing classroom are crucial for stimulating students' learning enthusiasm. Teachers can enrich classroom content and enhance its appeal by using multimedia teaching tools, such as audio-visual materials and interactive software. This diversified teaching method not only provides students with a higher-quality classroom experience but also deepens their understanding of writing content, helping them better grasp writing ideas and expressive skills, thereby consolidating their knowledge.

In modern English teaching, the traditional rote-learning and exam-oriented education model can no longer meet the needs of contemporary teaching. Modern English writing classrooms should place greater emphasis on practical application, highlighting diversity and innovation. For example, before starting writing instruction, teachers can assign background materials, suggested vocabulary, and preview tasks related to the writing topic to guide students into the writing context in advance. In class, teachers can provide guiding questions around the central topic, encouraging students to explore the writing content with questions in mind and stimulate their thinking. After class, teachers can assign open-ended or thought-provoking questions to encourage in-depth thinking and discussion among students. In fable or story-based writing instruction, teachers can organize discussions from multiple perspectives and assign related writing tasks. Through these methods, students can not only improve their language expression skills but also better understand and master the learning methods of English writing through communication, thereby promoting a comprehensive improvement in their writing abilities.

4. Theoretical and Practical Assessment of Middle School English Writing Instruction

4.1 The Practice of Middle School English Writing Instruction Based on Scaffolding Theory

Writing is a core component of language skills but is often overlooked in junior high school English teaching. Traditional writing instruction relies heavily on rote memorization of example sentences, which fails to truly enhance students' writing abilities. To address this issue, Scaffolding Theory has been introduced into writing instruction. This theory provides students with contextualized writing opportunities, guiding them to focus on the writing process and complete writing tasks independently with the help of scaffolds. Scaffolding Theory originates from Bruner and Ross's constructivist theory^[10] and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory^[11], emphasizing that learners can complete complex tasks with support from teachers or peers. Scaffolding instruction typically consists of five stages: building scaffolds, entering the context, independent exploration, cooperative learning, and evaluating outcomes. Domestic researchers, such as Wang Qiang^[12], have further proposed a process-oriented writing method, dividing writing into nine stages, each with clear objectives and emphasizing a student-centered teaching model.

In specific teaching practice, teachers first activate students' background knowledge through topics or task-driven activities related to their daily lives. For example, they can display pictures or stories related to the topic and guide students in discussions to stimulate their interest in writing^[12]. Subsequently, students organize their writing ideas through collective brainstorming and mind mapping, forming a structured knowledge framework. During the drafting stage, students engage in free writing based on the mind map and create detailed outlines to clarify the structure of their essays. Teachers provide necessary

guidance during this process, helping students analyze the topic, expand their thinking, and complete the first draft. In the final editing stage, students refine their writing through peer editing and self-editing, while teachers guide students in revision and proofreading based on the editing results, helping them develop good writing habits.

The application of Scaffolding Theory not only helps students break down writing tasks into manageable steps but also promotes their autonomous learning abilities. Teachers' roles in writing instruction gradually shift from leaders to facilitators, eventually removing the scaffolds entirely to encourage independent writing. However, research also points out its limitations, such as the failure to cover the entire learning process and the lack of long-term tracking of learning outcomes based on scaffold use. Therefore, future research needs to further explore the long-term impact of Scaffolding Theory in junior high school English writing instruction to optimize teaching effectiveness.

4.2 The Application and Effectiveness of Formative Assessment in English Writing Instruction

Formative assessment, as an essential teaching tool, plays an irreplaceable role in English writing instruction^[13]. It is not only an effective means of diagnosing students' learning issues but also helps students improve their learning strategies and enhance learning outcomes through timely feedback. Research by Black and William^[13] has shown that formative assessment significantly improves student learning outcomes, particularly for low-achieving students and those with learning difficulties.

The core of formative assessment lies in using feedback to help students identify the gap between their current knowledge, understanding, and skills and the learning goals, and to guide them in taking effective actions to achieve these goals. In practice, teachers can obtain information about students' learning through classroom discussions, tests, and assignments, and provide descriptive feedback and specific suggestions for improvement. Key characteristics of formative assessment, as proposed by Black and William, include providing students with opportunities to express their understanding, engaging in reflective and insightful teacher-student dialogues, and focusing feedback on unique aspects of students' work with suggestions for improvement, rather than simply comparing them with other students. Through these methods, formative assessment not only helps teachers gain a deeper understanding of students' strengths and needs but also allows teachers to adjust their teaching strategies through questioning and dialogue techniques, thereby optimizing students' learning experiences. Meanwhile, as the main agents of learning, students can gradually develop their self-assessment abilities, grasp the concept of "quality," and continuously improve through the learning process.

A study hypothesized that formative assessment would have no significant impact on primary school students' writing skills, but the experimental results refuted this hypothesis^[14]. The study conducted a three-month teaching experiment with 64 students, providing weekly creative writing prompts covering descriptive, narrative, exploratory, and analytical writing, along with oral and written feedback after each writing task. The results showed that formative assessment significantly improved students' English writing skills, with an average score increase of 7% to 14%^[14]. Four independent summative tests further confirmed the positive impact of formative assessment on students' performance.

These findings indicate that formative assessment not only significantly enhances students' English writing skills but also helps teachers optimize their teaching strategies and guide students in self-assessment^[13-15]. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers widely adopt formative assessment in classroom teaching, combined with self-assessment and peer-assessment, to comprehensively improve students' writing abilities and learning outcomes.

4.3 The Application and Effectiveness of Peer Feedback in English Writing Instruction

Peer feedback is a teaching strategy that involves students evaluating and providing suggestions to each other, thereby helping them better understand writing requirements, improve their writing content, and enhance their writing abilities^[16]. In English writing instruction, it not only allows students to review their writing from different perspectives, identify potential issues, and propose improvements but also strengthens their critical thinking skills by encouraging them to analyze the logic and coherence of texts from a reader's standpoint. Additionally, peer feedback enhances students' social skills and collaborative spirit, promotes the implementation of student-centered teaching models, and helps students gradually become more autonomous writers, thereby improving their writing performance and overall learning outcomes.

Kuyyogsuy^[17] employed a mixed-methods design, specifically an embedded experimental design, to

explore students' attitudes towards peer feedback and its role in developing English writing skills. The study found that students held positive attitudes towards peer feedback and achieved high levels of development in four areas: the writing process, affective strategies, critical thinking skills, and social interaction skills. Specifically, through peer feedback, students gained a better understanding of writing strategies and engaged more effectively in feedback exchanges, which significantly improved their writing scores and grammatical accuracy^[18]. Moreover, peer discussions not only fostered the development of critical thinking skills but also enhanced social skills through collaborative learning. Importantly, the peer feedback process supported a student-centered teaching model, empowering students to become more autonomous writers.

5. Conclusion: Integrated Application of Multiple Strategies in English Writing Instruction and Future Prospects

The educator Suhomlinsky once pointed out: "The starting point of teaching lies in stimulating students' interest and desire to learn." Psychological research has also confirmed the importance of this perspective. By innovating teaching methods and providing students with a "refreshing" classroom experience, their attention can be effectively captured, and their perceptual and cognitive abilities can be enhanced. Maintaining a high level of interest in writing can inspire students' creativity, thereby improving their English writing proficiency.

This study has explored various English writing instruction strategies, including direct instruction, process writing, and peer feedback, through comparative analysis. The results indicate that an integrated approach using multiple strategies is more effective than a single strategy, better meeting the diverse learning styles and needs of students. Although English writing accounts for a relatively small proportion of scores in middle school exams, its importance should not be overlooked. Writing proficiency at the middle school level not only directly affects students' subsequent English learning but also lays the foundation for their future academic and professional development. Solid grammatical knowledge and a rich vocabulary are key to enhancing writing ability, while effective guidance from teachers and active student participation are essential guarantees for achieving this goal.

In the future, English writing instruction should continue to integrate multiple strategies, focusing on the development of students' critical thinking and autonomous learning abilities. Teachers should also pay more attention to individual differences among students, providing personalized support and feedback to help each student achieve their full potential in English writing.

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