The Application of Comparative Continuation to English Writing Teaching in Senior High School

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Abstract: *English writing skill is one of the basic language skills in senior high school students' English learning, which reflects the learners' comprehensive language application ability. As a variant of continuation task, comparative continuation was put forward by Professor Wang Chuming in 2018 to strengthen interactive alignment effect of the continuation task and maximize the continuation task efficacy, consequently enhancing students' L2 writing level. Thus, the paper attempts to apply comparative continuation to English writing teaching in senior high school, hoping to provide a reference for teachers' English writing teaching and offer students an effective way to facilitate their L2 writing.*

Keywords: *Comparative Continuation; English Writing Teaching; Continuation Task*

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning refers to the process in which learners learn to express their thoughts in the language of others[5], and this process must be inseparable from imitation[8]. Meanwhile, foreign language learning is also a creative construction process. However, learners lack the real context of using the foreign language and the opportunity to interact with native speakers in the China's foreign language learning environment. Wang (2012) put forward "continuation task", which is in line with the characteristics of less listening and speaking conditions and sufficient reading and writing conditions in China's foreign language environment, and is regarded as the application of the "Xu" function of interactive dialogue in written expression[8]. Compared with other types of writing, continuation task combines reading (comprehensive skill) with writing (expressive skill) and builds creative use of language on imitation. And Wang (2012) pointed out that continuation task can effectively improve learners' foreign language writing level, which provides a new direction for the English writing investigation[8].

In 2016, continuation task was first adopted in Zhe Jiang College Entrance Examination English as a new type of question. Later, the New English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) points out that the main writing test formats include continuation task, proposition writing, summary writing, etc[2]. Since then, an increasing number of experimental provinces of college entrance examination reform incorporate continuation task into writing section to examine students' writing ability. Naturally, the application of continuation task not only meets the requirements of the new curriculum standard, but also solves the problem of separating language input from output in traditional English writing teaching. However, continuation task generally focuses on narrative essays as reading material, with very little attention paid to other genres such as argumentative essays and the alignment effect produced by continuation task is weaker than that produced by the dialogue, which weakens the language learning effect and causes the shortcomings of teaching application.

In order to address the issue of unsatisfactory interactive alignment effect of the continuation task and maximize the continuation task efficacy, Wang (2018) introduced two variants of continuation task——the iterative continuation and the comparative continuation[10]. Comparative continuation requires learners to sum up the main points that can be used for comparison in the reading material, which drives learners to review the reading material constantly. In this way, comparative continuation can strengthen the interaction between learners and the reading material, enhance alignment effect, and improve its advantages of facilitating learning. And compared with continuation task and iterative continuation, comparative continuation has two remarkable features: one is that the reading material is complete and students can imitate the text structure and language expressions in the reading material to express their own ideas; the other is that comparative continuation can be applicable to non-narrative,

such as argumentative writing, exposition, etc.

Since comparative continuation was introduced, there are only few studies conducted on comparative continuation (e.g., Xiong, 2018; Zhou, 2019; Yu and Wang, 2020; Zhan, Jiang and Huang, 2022) and the research participants are mostly college students. Hence, the paper attempts to apply the comparative continuation to English writing teaching in senior high school.

2. Previous Studies on Comparative Continuation

In this section, the introduction of comparative continuation is presented, and then the procedures of comparative continuation task are clarified, and lastly the studies on the application of comparative continuation to English writing teaching are shown.

2.1. The Introduction of Comparative Continuation

At the beginning of the 21st century, Wang proposed "The Length Approach" in order to get rid of the dilemma of "learning a foreign language for many years without being able to use it". By manipulating the length requirement of writing, learners are driven to write increasingly extended compositions, which boots their self-esteem, enhances their confidence in their ability to learn the L2, and brings their L2 learning potential into full play.

In the process of applying the Length Approach to promote learning, Wang noticed the function of context on language use and proposed that the context accompanying language learning can determine whether language knowledge can be effectively used. Based on the phenomenon of language association, Wang (2009) proposed the principle of "learn together, use together" (LTUT) in foreign language learning[6]. And based on this principle, Wang (2012) formally proposed "Continuation Task" in his article " Use of the Continuation Task to Improve L2 Learning Efficacy", arguing that the continuation task closely combines language imitation and creative use, providing a new model for English writing teaching[8.] Since then, domestic scholars carried out a lot of studies on the alignment effect of continuation task and the effects of continuation task on improving L2 learning.

Although these studies verify that continuation task has many advantages, there are a few limitations in continuation task. Firstly, the genre of continuation task is limited. Wang (2016) indicated that continuation task is generally limited to narrative[9]. In other words, the continuation task is not applicable to other genres such as argumentative writing. Secondly, the alignment effect produced by the continuation task is weaker than that produced by the direct dialogue, which weakens the language learning effect. According to Wang (2018), the intrapersonal interaction is embodied as the interaction between reading comprehension and writing in the process of continuation task, and the learners understand the reading material with the help of the existing language and relevant background knowledge in their brain, and then creatively expand the understood content[10]. However, learners only continue to write under the static and unchanged stimuli of the previous text, which requires strong self-control and certain external constraints. Even if students already possess a certain level of language proficiency, if they lack self-control, they could act randomly based just on their curiosity and imagination and continue to write even when they don't fully comprehend the previous text well. This type of continuation interacts poorly with the preceding text, resulting in a weaker alignment and making it harder to maximize the effect of language leveling.

In order to make up for the defects of continuation task, Wang (2018) proposed comparative continuation task, which aims to strengthen the interaction between students and reading materials and promote language learning[10]. Comparative continuation, one of the variants of continuation task, is the supplement and development of continuation task. Wang (2018) described comparative continuation as "a writing mode that requires learners to fully understand the complete reading material, then write a transition paragraph that summarizes the main points that can be used for comparison and declare their own view of point, and finish the comparative continuation based on the points mentioned in the transition paragraph one by one, and lastly draw a conclusion"[10].

2.2. The Procedures of Comparative Continuation

In 2018, Wang also put forward how to operate comparative continuation (see Figure 1)[10].

Firstly, the teacher should choose complete and high-quality reading materials that can be used for comparison. The content can be comparable interesting phenomena, novel ideas, etc., and the text type

can be narrative, argumentative writing, etc.

Secondly, the teacher should highlight the importance of thoroughly reading the assigned materials and clarifies the requirements of comparative continuation: write a summary transition to briefly summarize the points in the reading material that can be used for comparison, and state your own standpoints compared to the points in the material.

Thirdly, the teacher should guide students to fully understand the reading material. While reading, students can take notes, mark what can be used for comparison, underline the topic sentence and brilliant expressions, and write down their own thoughts in the margins. And the teacher can take an active role in explaining the reading material by employing intensive reading approaches such as strengthening comprehension of the preceding text, analyzing the layout, learning new words and phrases, etc.

Fourthly, the teacher should guide students to write a brief transition paragraph, which summarizes the main points of the reading material that need to be or deserved to be compared and pave the way for continuing paragraphs.

Fifthly, the teacher should guide students to write the points mentioned in the transition paragraph one by one. Specifically, the teacher should guide students to refer to the corresponding content in the reading material, imitate the text structure and language expression, and then express their own thoughts.

Finally, the teacher should remind students of attaching importance to the last paragraph.
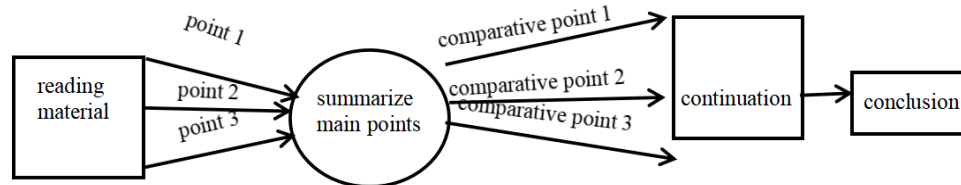

Figure 1: Procedures of the Comparative Continuation

2.3. Studies on the Application of Comparative Continuation to English Writing Teaching

Based on the introduction of comparative continuation, some scholars have begun to focus on the study of "Comparative Continuation".

Xiong (2018) conducted an empirical study with second-year non-English majors to investigate the alignment effect of argumentative comparative continuation and its impact on learners' language use. Both the experimental group and the control group were asked to complete a propositional essay on the same topic within 45 minutes. The experimental group read the reading material and then wrote an argumentative essay compared with the views of the reading material, while the control group did not read the reading material. The results showed that the experimental group produced lexical and phrasal alignment and frequently used the words and phrases that appeared in the reading material. In addition, the results also indicated the experimental group had a lower rate of Chinglish output than the control group, but there was no difference in linguistic form bias between two groups[12].

Zhou (2019) carried out an action study on improving the effectiveness of college English writing teaching with different continuation tasks, and the results showed that students' language expression and text structure had made obvious progress after the training of argumentative comparative continuation[14].

Yu and Wang (2020) took senior high school students as their research subjects and adopted within-subjects design to explore the effects of proposition writing and two kinds of comparative continuation task conditions (the ordinary comparative continuation and the comparative continuation with sentence filling) on argumentative writing. The findings suggested that the ordinary comparative continuation and the comparative continuation with sentence filling both better improved students' writing accuracy, fluency and complexity than propositional writing, but there are no significant differences in these three aspects between the two comparative continuation task conditions[13].

Zhan, Jiang and Huang (2022) conducted research on second-year English majors to explore the correlation between second language writing anxiety and writing achievements by employing questionnaire and interview and examine the effects of comparative continuation on alleviating second

language writing anxiety based on Xu-Argument and positive psychology theory. The results displayed that there was a significant negative correlation between second language writing anxiety and writing performance and comparative continuation effectively relieved students' second language writing anxiety, especially in terms of conceptualization anxiety[15].

To sum up, the number of studies on comparative continuation is quite limited and the research participants are mostly concentrated in the field of higher education. Thus, the present paper intends to apply the comparative continuation to English writing teaching in senior high school, attempting to provide a a reference for teachers' English writing teaching.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section, three relevant theoretical foundations on comparative continuation are presented, including the input and output hypothesis, interactive alignment model and Xu-argument.

3.1. The Input and Output Hypothesis

At the end of the 20th century, the famous American linguist Krashen put forward the theory of second language acquisition. The theory consists of five hypotheses: acquisition-learning hypothesis, monitor hypothesis, input hypothesis, affective filtering hypothesis, and natural order hypothesis. The language input hypothesis provides a lot of theoretical basis for the field of foreign language teaching, so the input hypothesis has become the most influential core theory among the five hypotheses.

The input hypothesis, also known as "the monitor theory", is the core content of the second language acquisition theory proposed by Krashen (1985)[1]. Krashen emphasized that the best way for a language learner to acquire a language is to have sufficient comprehensible input, which must be "a bit beyond" the learner's current level of competence. This theory can be expressed by the formula "i+1", where "i" indicates the learner's current language level and "1" indicates that the input language is slightly higher than the learner's current acquired language ability. In addition, Krashen argued that language input should have four requirements: comprehensible, interesting and relevant, not grammatically sequenced, and sufficient "i+1".

In response to Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain (1985) put forward the output hypothesis[4]. Swain believed that the comprehensible input theory is inadequate, and learners need the comprehensible output on the basis of it. To address this issue, Swain (1985) put forward the output hypothesis theory, which focuses on explaining that comprehensible output can improve the language level of the learners, and it is an indispensable part of the second language learning process. The theory consists of three main functions: attention function, hypothesis testing function and meta-language function. Firstly, the attention function refers to the fact that learners will pay special attention to their own grammatical errors when communicating with native speakers. Only when learners notice their own mistakes can they consciously correct them, which is also conducive to improving their language level in the output link, and thus strengthening the learning of input knowledge. Secondly, hypothesis testing function refers to the fact that language output has a hypothesis testing function for the semantics and syntax of the target language. Therefore, repetitive language output allows learners to test the accuracy of their mastery of the target language. Thirdly, meta-language function refers to the fact that learners use comprehensive language knowledge to reflect on their target language expressions. In the output process, learners actively use the existing knowledge and assimilate and internalize it, thus facilitating the learning of language knowledge more efficiently.

In comparative continuation, writing is based on reading. After reading the given text, learners can receive enough comprehensible input, which will have a positive impact on writing and thus improve learners' writing ability. It's worth noting that the difficulty of the reading materials should be slightly higher than the learners' current level according to the input hypothesis. Meanwhile, writing is the reinforcement of the input text information, testing whether the previous comprehensible input has been absorbed and internalized. In conclusion, comparative continuation integrates reading and writing. By combining input and output, the gap between comprehension and production of L2 learners is narrowed down. Thus, the comparative continuation can facilitate L2 learning.

3.2. Interactive Alignment Model

The most natural way that humans use language is through dialogue, and the mechanic of language

use is embedded in dialogue. In order to explore this mechanism, Pickering & Garrod (2004) proposed the Interactive Alignment Model, which argues that alignment originates from interaction and is the key to the success of interpersonal dialogue[3]. The two sides cooperate, adapt and adjust dynamically to each other during the dialogue, so that there is a convergence or alignment between their brain representations, and they share the same representation for understanding and output. In other words, interpersonal dialogue is a kind of interactive alignment, because the two parties need to cooperate and adapt to each other during the dialogue, and their expression contents tend to be consistent. Such alignment occurs both at the linguistic level and at the situational model level. Conversational sides coordinate the situational model in the interaction, which leads to alignment at the linguistic level, and then leads to understanding of the communicated message. The interaction and alignment between situational model and linguistic standard brings a close integration of linguistic comprehension and output in the dialogue and a smooth exchange of information.

Based on the interactive alignment model, Wang (2011) put forward the effective path of foreign language learning: interaction→understanding→alignment→output→acquisition[7]. Wang believed that learners' understanding ability always exceeds their output ability, and the leveling effect caused by this imbalance is the potential motivation for improving language level. In the leveling process, the interaction between understanding and output leads to alignment effect, and the weak output ability is constantly improved in the alignment with understanding ability. Therefore, effective language acquisition is rooted in interaction, through understanding, alignment, production and other links, and benefits from the synergy effect of the close combination of output and understanding. Wang (2011) also noted that the situational model was originally used to explain reading comprehension, but was applied by Pickering & Garrod to study dialogue comprehension[7]. This shows that the construction of the situation pattern is independent of the presentation style. Therefore, Wang believes that alignment effects not only occur in the dialogue process of interpersonal interaction, but also in the interaction between learners and the reading materials they contact during reading.

To sum up, according to the interactive alignment model, alignment in the situational model triggers alignment at the linguistic level. In the process of comparative continuation, learners are required to read a complete reading material, then write a transition paragraph that summarizes the main points that can be used for comparison in the reading material, and make a conclusion. In this way, firstly learners need to fully understand the reading material and construct situational model, and then create continuation content. In addition, the situational model constructed by learners should be mutually adapted and cooperated with the situational model in the reading material, that is, the interaction between learners' language comprehension and language production should produce the alignment effect.

3.3. Xu-Argument

Under the influence of the input and output hypothesis, the principle of "learn together, use together" and the interactive alignment model, Wang (2016) took the phenomenon of "Xu" in interpersonal communication as the starting point, explored the effect of "Xu" on facilitating learning, and proposed second language acquisition learning view that "Xu" promotes learning[9]. Wang pointed out that people's level of language comprehension is always higher than their level of language output, which means that there is an eternal asymmetry between comprehension and production of language, but "Xu" can promote the intersection of comprehension and production.

Based on this, Wang (2016) put forward an important theory of language acquisition called "Xu-argument", which contains two basic concepts: language is learned through "Xu", and learning efficiency is achieved through "Xu"[9].

Compared with other language acquisition theories, "Xu-argument" has the following characteristics: Firstly, "Xu-argument" believes that there are incomplete paragraphs in dialogue, and the contents need to be supplemented and expanded, which can provide impetus for the continuation of dialogue and provide opportunities for language learning. Secondly, "Xu-argument" believes that there is an asymmetry between language comprehension and language production, and "Xu" intersects comprehension and production, which helps to narrow down the gap between comprehension and production and raise the level of learners' language production. Thirdly, "Xu-argument" attempts to solve the fundamental problem of "learn together, use together", and effectively connects the "static" operation of language with the "dynamic" changes of the content of thought and expression. Fourthly, "Xu-argument" is the deepening of the study of interaction. In view of the above characteristics, Wang (2019) pointed out that "Xu" is not only the source of interaction, but also a mechanism for

strengthening interaction and an effective way to acquire language[11].

Wang (2016) designed a variety of "Xu" tasks according to the principle of "Xu-argument" and one of these is comparative continuation[9]. The implementation of comparative continuation can not only reflect the learning promotion effect of "Xu-argument", but also enhance the interaction between comprehension and production through "comparison", and improve the defect of insufficient interaction intensity in the continuation task, so as to better utilize the function of "Xu".

4. The Application of Comparative Continuation to English Writing Teaching in Senior High School

Based on the procedures of the comparative continuation (Wang, 2018), this paper takes the teaching of "Is Exploring Space a Waste of Time and Money", which is selected from Compulsory 3 unit 3 of senior high school English of PEP (2019), as an example to clarify the application of comparative continuation to English writing teaching in senior high school.

Step 1: Read the reading material independently

The teacher distributes the reading material and asks students to read it in 10 minutes. Then the teacher advises students to take notes, pay attention to the text genre, underline the point of view, evidence(reasons) and argumentation, and mark useful expressions. And the teacher encourages students to write down their thoughts about space exploration.

Step 2: Analyze the reading material

Activity-1: Read for the main idea

The teacher asks students to read the text again and conclude the main idea of the text.

Q: What's the main idea of the text? (Introducing the different benefits of exploring space.)

Activity-2: Read for text type and work out the structure

The teacher guides students to identify the text type and work out the structure of the passage.

Q1: What kind of text is it ? (Argumentation)

Q2: What's the structure of the whole passage?

Activity-3: Read for organization and language features

(1)The teacher guides students to read the first paragraph and underline the different opinions about space exploration.

Opinion 1: Some people argue that we should stop waste time and money exploring space.

Opinion 2: However, others feel this is a shallow view which fails to realize how exploring space helps us.

(2)Then the teacher asks students to think about which one illustrates the author's opinion and how they know it.

Q1: What's the author's opinion?   (The second one.)

Q2: How do you know this sentence shows the author's opinion? ("however" "shallow")

(3)The teacher asks students to read para.2-4 and find the three topic sentences that summarizes the writer's arguments about space exploration.

(4)Then the teacher helps students to think about how the writer supports his argument in para.2-4.

Q: How does the writer support his argument?

A.Listing the data   B.Making comparisons   C.Giving examples   D.Giving explanations

(5) The teacher asks students to underline the sentence that repeats the writer's opinion in para. 5.

Q: Which sentence repeats the writer's opinion? (In closing, exploring space provides the world with many different benefits.)

Activity-4 Learn some important and difficult language points

The teacher explains some important and difficult language points to students.

Key words and phrases: globe, argue, shallow, pattern, monitor,regular, resource, limited, attach

Important sentence: However, others feel this is a shallow view which fails to realize how exploring space helps us.

The greatest attention at present is on Mars because it is closer to Earth.

Activity-5: Answer several text-related questions

The teacher asks students several text-related practice questions to confirm that students fully understand the text.

Q1: What has space exploration done for food exploration?

Q2:What did the pictures of Earth from space make people realize?

Acticity-6 Draw a mind map

The teacher leads students to draw a mind map to conclude the structure of reading material and freely express their views.

Step 3: Finish comparative continuation

Activity-1: Write a transition paragraph

(1)The teacher asks students to write a transition paragraph that briefly sums up the main points in the text and propose their own point of view on space exploration.

(2)The teacher reminds students that if they present the same view of point as the input reading material, the perspective of argument or the evidence must be different.

According to the reading material, exploring space provides the world with many different benefits. Firstly, exploring space has already made a difference in the fight against world hunger. Secondly, space exploration has already promoted technological improvements that benefits to us. Finally, sending astronauts into space has helped people to think about the world's problems and even find ways to solve them. Although exploring space has many benefits, I still hold the belief that exploring space has more disadvantages than advantages.

Activity-2: Propose the arguments

The teacher guides students to propose the arguments based on the points mentioned in transition paragraph and develop them respectively in following paragraphs.

First of all, it's not worthwhile spending all this money on expensive research and experiments when so many people need food. The greatest attention at present should be on feeding the hungry and dealing with the fatal disease.........

Secondly, space exploration is dangerous for astronauts' lives............

Finally, there are a lot of unsolved mysteries on earth. So why are we going into space to explore?........

Activity-3: Write a conclusion

The teacher asks students to make a conclusion.

In closing, even if there are many different benefits to space exploration, I still contend that it doesn't seem a very wise investment to go to space.........

Step 4: Conduct evaluation activities

The teacher requires students to exchange their compositions and correct mistakes in spelling and grammar. Then the teacher asks students to hand in their compositions and give them feedback next class.

5. Conclusion

Comparative continuation, the supplement and development of continuation task, can enhance the interaction between learners and the reading material and thus facilitate L2 learning. The paper

provides guidance for pedagogical uses of the comparative continuation in senior high school. In actual teaching, the teachers can attempt to apply comparative continuation to English writing teaching, so as to improve students' comprehensive language application ability.

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