

# The Application of Schema Theory in Teaching Continuation Writing for Senior High School Students

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## Abstract

With the continuous advancement of education and teaching reform, higher requirements have been put forward for English teaching. In China, the continuation task has been incorporated into the National Matriculation English Test for testing students' comprehensive English ability since 2016. However, it also has become a burden that most teachers and students are anxious about. In senior high school English classrooms, teachers are required to integrate reading and writing effectively so as to achieve the purpose of cultivating students' core competency. Hence, based on schema theory, this paper explores the teaching strategies of English continuation writing in senior high school in order to improve students' ability of continuation writing and improve their comprehensive use of language.

## Keywords

Continuation Task; Schema Theory; Senior High School English.

## 1. Introduction:

Based on the Xu-argument, continuation tasks have been designed to integrate input and output in an interactive context, such as integrated reading-writing continuation tasks and integrated reading translating continuation tasks, among others [1]. In China, as an innovative mode of source-based writing task, the continuation task has been incorporated into the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) for testing students' comprehensive English ability since 2016. Compared with traditional English writing, continuation writing, which requires students to read and accomplish an unfinished source text, is deemed as a contributor to the improvement of students' language competence (i.e. the ability to understand and express meaning), innovative and divergent thinking ability [2].

The new writing task, however, has become a burden that most teachers and students are anxious about. Students constantly find themselves struggling to select, combine, arrange and develop an idea coherent enough. Under this circumstance, the schema theory provides a new perspective for the study of continuation task teaching, as it explores a set of effective strategies for activating existing schema, constructing new ones, and consolidating the inherent schema from the perspectives of linguistic schema, content schema, and formal schema. Therefore, this paper carries out an initial exploration of applying schema theory to the teaching of continuing tasks in senior high school.

## 2. Schema Theory

Schema was proposed by a German philosopher called Immanuel Kant, and the theory was developed by Bartlett and then furthered by Rumelhart. "Schema" was widely used till 1926 when Piaget named it so. A schema is an information structure through which the human brain represents and stores knowledge [3][4]. Schemata can be classified into three main categories, namely linguistic schema, content schema, and formal schema. Linguistic schema refers to the existing way of students' inherent language knowledge and ability to manipulate language,

which serves as the basis for English writing [5]. Content schema refers to the stored background knowledge of discourse content, including familiarity with the topic, cultural knowledge, and associated personal experience. Formal schema means the knowledge stored in humans' minds about the form, rhetoric, and structure of different types of discourse. The development of schema theory in China can be divided into three stages. The period from 1980s to 1990s was known as Theoretical Discussion Period during which the focus was turned on philosophy. From 1991 to 2000, researchers realized the importance of empirical field such as reading and translation. Since 2000, researchers have further explored the relationship between English teaching and Schema theory.

Although schema theory was derived from the field of philosophy and psychology, numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the schema theory in various aspects of EFL learning and instruction. According to certain studies, schema theory played as an important role in the development of reading teaching models and had a major impact on reading comprehension [5][6]. Others demonstrated that schema theory has the potential to improve learners' listening ability [7][8]. The previous essays concerned more about reading and listening. In recent years, empirical studies were conducted to explore the theory in writing field [9]. Nevertheless, there is much room for research on the influence and application of schema theory to continuation tasks as the theory is probably able to provide teachers with a writing teaching model for representing and generating knowledge. Hence, based on schema theory, this paper explores practical teaching strategies of English continuation writing in senior high school so that students' ability of continuation writing can be enhanced.

### 3. The Continuation Task

The continuation task, as a new form of integrated reading-writing task, has witnessed a tremendous growth of research since it was firstly advanced by Wang [10]. In the process of continuation, learners need to not only fully understand the given text, but create new content, imitate and use the words and structures that appeared in the given text, thus producing interactive alignment effects, and improving the efficiency of learning foreign language. In other words, in the process of continuation task, the combination of language input and output, language imitation and creation, and language learning and application can be realized.

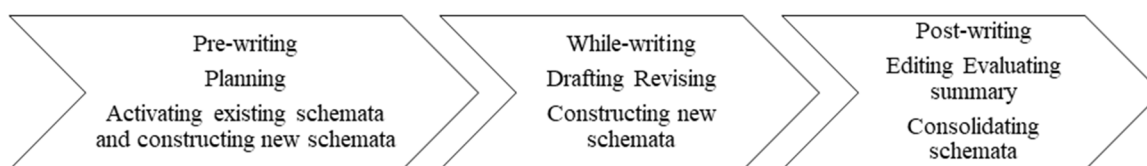
Wang's exploration of alignment into L2 writing expands the facilitative role of alignment from dialogues to texts and proves that continuation task has great language learning potential. Empirical studies reported that continuation task can help enrich lexical items and reduce form-based errors [10][11], generate more gains in language accuracy and complexity than topic-based writing tasks [12][13], stimulate learner imagination, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of writing achievement [14]. In general, existing studies mainly focus on various task-related factors that may affect the extent to which the potential can be exploited, such as the linguistic complexity of the reading material [15][16], language input [10][17], and the genre of reading material [18]. Empirical researches presented above demonstrate that the testing application of the continuation task can bring along positive wash-back. However, it laid too much emphasis on exploring whether alignment occurred on and how it affected the accuracy of continuation. One of the influencing factors about how teacher explicit instruction affects the alignment effect in continuation task is still understudied. Specifically, the pedagogical theories related to the continuation tasks remain unexplored. Hence, in order to enrich the development of schema theory and continuation task, this study is carried out.

### 4. Teaching Continuation Writing based on Schema Theory

Writing is a complicated mental activity that grows by interaction with other people or other texts. A variety of instructions to teach writing have been discussed, including the product

approach, the process approach, and the genre approach. In this study, process approach is integrated to continuation task instruction. Based on communication theory and cognition theory, the process approach focuses on the cultivation of students' ability to employ various skills through reading and cognitive activities. A typical process approach contains four main stages, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing, thus paving ways for learners to think about writing according to their actions instead of final products. Based on schema theory, English writing can be divided into three main steps: activating existing schema, construct new schema, consolidating students' schema [19].

Hence, in the process of continuation writing, learners' linguistic schema, content schema, and formal schema should be combined to work. Additionally, learners' schema should be built and enhanced in the process of pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing, which contains planning, drafting, revising, editing, evaluating, and summary (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The flow of teaching procedures

#### 4.1. Activating Existing Schema

Schema activation refers to inspiring the existing schema to help students predict what comes next in the source text. As mentioned above, in a continuation task, students are supposed to complete an unfinished story after reading a source text. For students, to understand a passage means not only all about the text itself, but also about their background or schematic knowledge. Hence, at the beginning of continuation task, a brief introduction to the general theme, such as relevant reading materials, pictures and short videos, should be introduced, which helps to minimize students' cultural misunderstanding and maximize comprehension of source text.

Based on the story, pre-reading questions revolving around the character and development (i.e. what; when; where; who; why) should be asked. Such questions not only could provide a clear structure for learners, improving their reading comprehension, but also are conducive to story plot prediction. Taking the unfinished story "Arthur and robbery" (Appendix I) as an example, based on the 5Ws questions, an outline about the process can be made (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The outline of the story: Arthur and robbery

Wh-	What happened?
Who	Arthur; the young man
Where	Park Avenue near the First National Bank
When	One day
What	Tone: A funny story Beginning: Arthur helped a young man who carried a big suitcase. Development: Arthur heard the long loud noise of an alarm; he realized that the young man might be the bank thief. Climax: Because Arthur was still carrying the suitcase, he was suspected as the robber. Frightened and nervous, Arthur run. (Finished by students) Ending: Arthur took a taxi and went to the police station. (Finished by students)

Furthermore, students can build a bridge between the unfinished part and the source text through a visual tool, namely semantic mapping, which helps students to see how ideas related to others [19]. It can reveal what students already knew about the topic and provides a base upon which they can construct the new information acquired and extracted from a text. Taking Arthur and robbery as another example, after discussion students can draw a semantic mapping of development and climax of this story (see Figure 2).

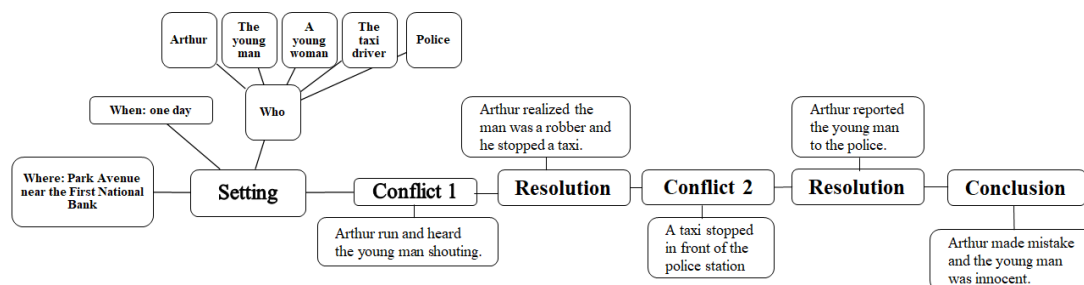


Figure 2. Semantic map

To sum up, in the pre-writing stage, the existing schemata in students' minds should be activated and the new schemata, including linguistic schemata, content schemata and formal schemata should be constructed. Therefore, in continuation task teaching class, students are guided to construct linguistic and formal schema, expanding their vocabulary bank, related sentence patterns and grammar structures as well as cohesive structures consciously by analyzing the reading text through semantic mapping mentioned above. What's more, as majority of the source texts provided in the continuation tasks are rooted in daily life, students' previous knowledge relating to the topic could be stimulated. And learners should be guided to dig out the emotion or the tone of the story, thus content schema can be constructed while their reasoning and predictive ability are enhanced.

#### 4.2. Constructing New Schema

Based on the pre-writing activities, the existing schemata in students' minds have been activated and the new schemata constructed. Therefore, in the composing process, students should apply related schema knowledge to transform information into sentences and paragraphs, thus abstract schema can be internalized and consolidated. During this period, at first students are supposed to make an outline according to the pre-writing activities and organize their ideas to complete the 150-word compositions with a thematic meaning independently within a required amount of time in class. In this phase, they need to focus on the story's content without caring too much about grammar and spelling errors. Only in this way, can students pay attention to the development of the storyline and apply what they have formed to the upcoming process of while-writing. Additionally, teachers should observe the whole writing process and offer instructions if necessary. Last but not least, after finishing the draft, the students are supposed to read their compositions to correct words, grammar, and others.

#### 4.3. Consolidating Schema

After the draft, it is crucial for students to get feedback information.

For one thing, the draft should be revised by students themselves and their partners, namely self-revising and peer-revising, which can consolidate students' schemata and unleash their passions of writing. In the self-revising process, students reactivated the schema knowledge so as to check, correct and evaluate the compositions through going over their drafts carefully. In the peer-revising (peer-responding) process, a checklist transformed from the evaluation

criteria of continuation task (Appendix II) could be introduced explicitly, thus helping the learners know where they should be heading toward. During this period, students should first pay attention to the completeness of the composition, the whole content with theme and value, logical arrangement of paragraphs, the propriety of cohesion. After macro textual structure was checked, micro language expressions editing such as sentence structure, grammar, diction, word spelling correction could be focused on.

For another, the teacher would evaluate the compositions. According to composition marking standards (Appendix II), teachers are primarily responsible for analyzing composition structures, sentence content, grammar, and vocabulary. In accordance with the errors in students' continuation writings, common and typical mistakes should be selected out. And then, the teacher wrote them on the blackboard, guiding the students to correct all them. If time permitted, after revising, editing and evaluating, students could be required to rewrite their drafts based on their classmates' comments and the instructor's. It is proven that through constant and recurrent practice and modification, the students' schema knowledge could be consolidated timely and their writing ability could be enhanced. In addition, the teacher would finally show a model essay, summarize its structure, the typical sentence patterns, language features and related content and ask students to write them down so that the students' knowledge of writing schemata can be strengthened and consolidated again. It is noted that the teacher should serve as a facilitator or a consultant to individuals in this period.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, in the teaching of English continuation writing in senior high school, teachers should equip students with various writing strategies based on schema theory. The activation and reconstruction of students' linguistic, content, and formal schema are prioritized in schema theory-based instruction. Writing strategies and activities such as brainstorming, experience sharing, 5Ws guided questions, discussion, outline and analyzing the related reading material are effective in enhancing students' manipulation of the target language and relevant cultural background, which helps to eventually bringing alive and redrawing learners' related schema. Besides, post-writing stages of revising, editing, redrafting and evaluation are conducive to the improvement of students' writing quality and realization of the reconstruction and consolidation of schema.

Additionally, the outdated composition assessment standard shall be replaced by an alternative one which combines peer-revising, self-editing and teacher evaluation together. By caring about the whole process of writing, teachers are able to understand the most urgent needs of their students, especially those of under-performed students. And students' confidence, creation as well as critical thinking could also be boosted during a writing process full of teacher's caring, encouragement and patience. In a word, schema theory integrated with process approach puts forward the corresponding guiding direction for continuation task instruction in senior high schools, which is worthy of every educator's attention and thinking.

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