

# The Effects of Continuation Writing on Improving Writing Coherence of Non-English Major Students in Chinese Junior Colleges

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**Abstract:** Current curriculum design for ESL (English as a second language) learners seem to ignore language coherence in China (Peng, 2016). ESL teachers seem to put emphasis on sentences themselves (vocabularies, sentence structures, grammars etc.) instead of language consistency. However, language coherence is an important standard for evaluating writing quality (Higgins et al. 2004), even the most significant standard (Crossley & McNamara, 2011). With very few researchers investigating this field, this study intends to explore Continuation Writing, a new rising teaching method, put forward by Wang Chuming, from the ESL teacher perspective can improve ESL learners' writing coherence, targeting junior college students who are not English majors. Quantitative method will be conducted to evaluate the changes of language coherence when students equipped with the method "Continuation Writing". The language analysis tool-Coh-metrix will be used to exam the language coherence levels of participants' English writings closely from various aspects, such as referential cohesion, sentences overlap, logical cohesion and so on. This study may signify the urgent needs for ESL teaching on English writing and the improvement of language coherence will help ESL learners to improve their English writing ability to some extent.

## 1. Introduction

SLA (Second language acquisition) is the process of being able to use the language of the others to express one's own mind (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). In China, most SLA learners regard English as their second language. Overall, although most ESL (English as the second language) learners in China have learned English since primary schools, they have bad academic performance, especially on English writing. According to the statistics of IELTS test, the writing scores of Chinese candidates rank the last in Asia; therefore, it is of vital importance for researchers to analyze the deep reasons for these phenomena and figure out effective ways to improve English writing levels of ESL learners. Accordingly, in order to improve ESL learners' English writing ability, Wang Chuming put forward "Continuation Writing", teaching method that combines reading (input) with writing (output) and constructs creative use of language on imitation, which enables learners to immediately use what they have learnt and avoid Chinglish to some extent (Wang, 2015).

Most previous studies on Continuation Writing focused on its influence on vocabulary acquisition, grammar learning, structural priming and so on, and there is very limited research on the coherence of English writing; however, language coherence is one of the most important standards for evaluating writing quality. Therefore, the study, taking junior college students as participants, will investigate whether Continuation Writing can improve the language coherence of ESL learners' English writing or not.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Non-English Majors and Sla

Writing has always been regarded as one of the most important and demanding skills. In the past few decades, the importance of writing has been paid more and more attention by the English

teaching community. Both students and teachers are eager to improve their English writing ability. The requirements for high school students' English writing ability are summarized as being able to write in appropriate, coherent and logical language and expression. All kinds of practical articles, such as reports, notices, letters, etc

Studies on Motivation to Learn English in SLA, Robert Gardner is one of the most influential L2 motivation researchers abroad. Gardner (1985) believed that L2 motivation is a central psychological engine or energy center covering effort, cognition, and affect. In other words, motivation means the effort to work, the desire to achieve the goal, and the combination of the positive attitude towards language learning. It can also be understood as personal investment, which influences the action one takes and the affect one exhibits, and which translates into the "direction, intensity, persistence and quality of what is done and expressed" (Maehr&Meyer, 1997: 373).

The continuation method is another foreign language teaching method proposed by Professor Wang Chuming of Guangzhou University of foreign studies after the length method. Professor Wang Chuming once wrote that the efficiency of foreign language learning depends on the close combination of learners' language understanding and output. The combination of the two produces synergistic effect. The closer the combination is, the stronger the synergistic effect will be, and the more obvious the learning effect will be. In fact, it is flattening effect, that is, learning effect. The closest activity that can combine language understanding and production is to interact with native speakers. Interaction usually occurs in interpersonal communication. The basic way is dialogue. Dialogue needs mutual cooperation, psychological and cognitive adaptation, understanding each other's social status and relationship with oneself, and understanding the current context. In order to make an appropriate response in the dialogue, the process of cooperation of mutual cooperation and mutual adaptation leads to mutual cooperation. Cooperation is a kind of psychological and cognitive infection, which can be reflected in the convergence of language use. The cooperation in dialogue is two-way, the interlocutors adapt to each other, inspire each other, focus automatically, and produce flattening effect, Flood & Lapp (1987) found that in the process of reading, learners construct the text by letters, words, sentences and paragraphs, so as to deepen the understanding of the text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) respectively mentioned five types of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and vocabulary. The first three belong to the grammatical category, and the last two belong to the lexical category. According to the hypothesis, the reason why the text appears fluent is that the author uses the cohesive devices mentioned above to some extent. Cohesion mainly predicts the existence of another paragraph by expressing the relationship between two paragraphs, so as to establish a cohesive relationship and make people understand the semantic relationship between sentences. In terms of meaning, Halliday and Hasan divide conjunctions into progressive, transitional, causal and temporal according to semantic relations. Hoey (1991) holds that the study of textual cohesion mainly focuses on the study of lexical patterns, which refers to the repetition of words in the text to some extent. Good discourse is to achieve the coherence of discourse through the repetition of words.

## **2.2 The Method of Continuation Writing**

Inspired by Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, Wang Chuming (2010) put forward a task-based approach "the Length Approach" (the early form of Continuation Writing). The Length Approach holds that the second language learners' writing skill and language competence can be improved by writing long compositions. The key word "length" is fluctuant and depends on the learners' current language competency. In other words, the learners are supposed to use more words and proper expressions to compose the compositions to the best of their ability. In addition, the Length Approach can reduce the learners' affective filter and stimulate learning motivation. However, this approach is lack of contextual priming and creative use of input, which may limit the acquisition of the second language.

To make up for deficiencies of the Length Approach, Wang put forward a new teaching method --- Continuation Writing. Afterwards, the effects of this method have been verified by many experiments, such as the task-fulfilling directed factors (Yuan, 2013), reducing language errors,

improving the efficiency of vocabulary learning and promoting the acquisition of grammar structures (Wang & Wang, 2015). It is proclaimed that the method has many advantages for ESL learners: 1) unleash their imaginations and cultivate the ability of innovative thinking; 2) combine their English input with output closely, which can help to produce the alignment effect; 3) the ESL learners can interact with the given materials and even the writer by reading backward, and thus strengthen the alignment effect; 4) it is suitable for the ESL learners of various levels of English (Wang, 2016).

The continuation writing task is a newly developed and integrated way to stimulate the language learning, which is a knowledge-transforming process from conceptual and textual aspects. Learners rely on the conceptual information for source interpretation and writing development, and directly employ or imitate the noticed textual information in the continuation (Ye & Ren, 2019). Mao and Jiang (2017) conducted a research on the effectiveness of continuation writing on a group of sophomore students at a college, employing an advanced computational analyzer to assess the syntactic complexity measures, their length of production for instance, which demonstrates that the continuation task facilitates the second language written production by improving the writing syntactic complexity for the second language learners.

### **2.3 Writing Coherence**

English writing has always been considered as a critical subject to be researched among ESL teachers and educators. Facing the situation that most Chinese college students still remain incompetent in English writing, many studies have been conducted to find out the existing problems of college English writing, to figure out the possible reasons that may result in writing incompetence, and to ascertain ways to improve students' writing skill. Writing coherence means clear and reasonable connection between the writing parts and sentences, which should be connected in a smooth and logical order (Li, Yuan & Zhang, 2014). Since the conceptual meaning of the writing sentences mainly depends on the word order, the arrangement of the writing parts of sentences is essential to the accurate expression of ideas. The coherent sentence is easy to understand, not containing any ambiguity in grammar rules and usage, while the incoherent sentences would misguide readers and present rather ambiguous meanings to be interpreted in different ways.

Cohesion shows a text's quality and how sentences in a text connect to each other. By using cohesive devices including grammatical and lexical cohesion, it is expected that the words are connected between clauses in the text and the sentences in the text can relate to each other (Farida & Rosyidi, 2019). Therefore, coherence can show a student's English level, through their use of synonyms and collocations. When students have reached the higher education level, it is assumed that they have mastered different texts that they have learned at high schools. However, many students still present to have incomplete characteristics in English writing, especially in the cohesion aspect.

Many studies have focused on examining college students' writing quality and their cognitive ability. They identify students' problems and difficulties in arranging the sentences, especially in a lack of understanding of cohesion. Coherence is very important in writing, and there are few related studies. Therefore, this paper analyzes it from the perspective of continuation. Students' writing abilities in English is considered as the weakest among the four linguistic skills, because most students rarely have the awareness of cohesion and coherence in writing. Chinese EFL learners have different proficiency levels in terms of using cohesive items. In the main, higher proficiency EFL learners' can apprehend and manipulate cohesive devices better, which to some extent reflects the gradual maturation of their written discourse competence (Yang & Sun, 2012). As a result, the correct use of cohesive devices correlates significantly with students' writing quality and their English abilities.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Statement of the Problem**

There are rare studies to discuss whether continuation writing can promote the coherence of ESL learners' English writing in China. In addition, the subjects of relevant studies are all English majors or college ESL learners, whereas there is no research on junior college students who are not English majors. Therefore, this study aims to explore whether continuation writing can improve the coherence of the ESL learners of the junior college, English writings. It tries to answer the following research questions: (1) Can continuation writing improve the ESL learners' writing coherence? (2) How the use of continuation writing can influence non-English major students' coherence in their writing? (3) How can the alignment affect influence students' coherence in their English writing?

### 3.2 Hypothesis

Continuation writing can improve the ESL learners' writing coherence. Through the control experiment, the research compares different writing results of students and demonstrates that students who use continuation writing present to have better writing than others. Combined with continuation writing, the alignment effect can strengthen students' coherence in English writing.

It is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data. In order to examine variables that have already been established in the literature and to see to what extent hypothesis regarding these variables can be confirmed or refuted (Malhotra, 1998), the research will employ quantitative design. In quantitative studies, they will provide evidence of how all research factors have been addressed, to assess the research validity and reliability, and decide whether the findings can be applied in the relative area of practice (Heale & Twycross, 2015). To make the statistics accurate, all the subjects take part into the English Level Test and the scores of the three groups do not have distinctive differences. Each writing will be scored by two teachers (The reliability of the two teachers was 0.01). Language analysis tool Coh-matrix and SPSS will be applied to analyze the effect of continuation writing on coherence.

The 90 participants who have similar English abilities from the same junior college belong to three random classes (A, B and C) and all of them are ESL learners. They are divided into three equal-number groups. Before the experiments, all the subjects take part in the English Level Test and the scores of whom do not have distinctive differences.

The experiment materials are an English reading material *I am legend* (the end the selected part has been erased) with 5 True or False questions. The story tells that Robert fights alone with the vampires who have been infected by an unknown virus in New York City.

### 3.3 Research Procedures

A control experiment is designed to minimize the effects of variables other than the independent variable, which can increase the reliability of the results through a comparison among control measurements. The research uses the control experiment to compare three group students' writing results. Group A students need to read the given material and finish the T or F questions within 40 minutes; then, they are given another 50 minutes to write an end for the material according to the given part and they can imitate the vocabularies, phrases, sentence structures, writing styles etc. The students of group B need to finish the reading in 30 minutes and another 50 minutes to do the same continuation writing task. Group C students just need to listen to the teacher's introduction of the material (in Chinese) and then begin to complete the same writing task in English as the other two groups.

### 3.4 Research Tools

Recently, due to the development of corpus linguistics, studies about discourse research began to use quantitative analysis. The level of coherence covers language itself and content, while the former refers to the coherence of grammar and latter refers to semantic relevance (Iapata & Barzilay, 2005). McNamara use analyzing tool Coh-matrix to do a series of research on writing coherence (Crossley & McNamara, 2011; McNamara et al., 2014) and they found that Coh-matrix can measure the language features both surface and deep level, such as the complexity of grammar, lexical information, and coherence. The related index of coherence includes narrative level,

interdigitation, the concise level of grammar, the detail of vocabulary, sentence overlap and logical level, tense consistency and meaning consistency. The higher index is, the higher level of coherence is.

### 3.5 Data Processing

After using Coh-metrix computational tool to analyze the essays submitted by the students participating in the experiment, the researcher lists 12 indicators for each essay. According to the scores of English proficiency test, the average levels of the students in the three classes are same, but for individuals who deviate far from the average level, the overall analysis will be greatly affected by the small variance of the sample data. Therefore, research deletes the data of the 5 students with the highest and lowest index scores in each class, and selects the indicators of the 20 students in the middle for analysis. Considering that the number of samples is less than 30, the data conforms to the normal distribution and the variances of the sample data of each group are close, so researcher uses two independent sample t tests to analyze.

### 4. Result Analysis

By comparing the judgment experimental group A and the control group C, our research analyzes the influence of continuous writing after reading on the coherence of writing. The results of independent sample t-test show that among the 12 indicators, only the three indicators of narration, textual relevance, and logic show significantly strong differences (shown in Table 1), and the differences among other indicators are not obvious. Considering that the overall English proficiency of the three groups of students is similar, the experimental composition topics are clear in storytelling, and the writing difficulty is in line with the English proficiency of college students, it is reasonable that the overall level of discourse coherence is not significantly different. Especially in terms of LSA overlap, Verb cohesion, Intentional verbs incidence, temporal cohesion, etc., the differences are quite small.

However, on the three indicators of narration (PAC = 0.007), textual relevance (PAC = 0.049), and logic (PAC = .004), there are significant differences between the experimental group and the control group, which may be caused by different types of writing.

Therefore, the researcher infers that continuous writing after reading has no effect on verb cohesion, grammatical habits, sentence overlap and other aspects of writing. These factors mainly depend on the students' English foundation and expression ability. Moreover, it is demonstrated that continuous writing after reading can improve the coherence of writing, which is manifested in narration, textual relevance, and logic. That is, with the same English foundation, continuous writing after reading can contribute students to narrate the story more completely and smoothly.

Table 1 There Are Differences between the Experimental Group and the Control Group

	AA	AS	CA	CS	均值差	显著性
Text Easability Principle Component Scores						
Text Easability PC Narrativity, percentile	0.90	0.10	0.81	0.10	0.092	0.007
Text Easability PC Syntactic simplicity, percentile	0.54	0.30	0.41	0.28	0.123	0.200
Text Easability PC Word concreteness, percentile	0.74	0.24	0.81	0.22	-0.068	0.366
Text Easability PC Referential cohesion, percentile	0.65	0.23	0.57	0.32	0.079	0.388
Text Easability PC Deep cohesion, percentile	0.73	0.25	0.57	0.23	0.159	0.049
Text Easability PC Verb cohesion, percentile	0.45	0.23	0.40	0.24	0.048	0.541
LSA						
LSA overlap, adjacent sentences, mean	0.18	0.08	0.18	0.08	0.002	0.945
LSA overlap, all sentences in paragraph, mean	0.14	0.07	0.15	0.07	-0.013	0.581
Connectives						
Causal connectives incidence	0.24	0.13	0.20	0.08	0.042	0.235
Logical connectives incidence	0.46	0.15	0.31	0.16	0.151	0.004
Situation Model						
Intentional verbs incidence	0.29	0.14	0.28	0.13	0.004	0.921
Temporal cohesion, tense and aspect repetition, mean	0.82	0.10	0.81	0.10	0.010	0.758

Similarly, by comparing the non-judgment experimental group B with the control group C, this research analyzes the influence of continuous writing after reading on the coherence of writing. The results of independent sample t-test showed that only narration (PBC = 0.016) and logic (PBC = 0.049) showed strong differences among the 12 indicators (shown in Table 2). The differences among indicators are not obvious.

Table 2 Comparison of The Differences between the Experimental Group and the Control Group without Judgment

	BA	BS	CA	CS	均值差	显著性
Text Easability Principle Component Scores						
Text Easability PC Narrativity, percentile	0.89	0.07	0.81	0.10	0.080	0.016
Text Easability PC Syntactic simplicity, percentile	0.42	0.35	0.41	0.28	0.003	0.902
Text Easability PC Word concreteness, percentile	0.82	0.16	0.81	0.22	0.008	0.778
Text Easability PC Referential cohesion, percentile	0.62	0.28	0.57	0.32	0.046	0.500
Text Easability PC Deep cohesion, percentile	0.66	0.26	0.57	0.23	0.085	0.346
Text Easability PC Verb cohesion, percentile	0.42	0.23	0.40	0.24	0.020	0.871
LSA						
LSA overlap, adjacent sentences, mean	0.19	0.09	0.18	0.08	0.012	0.506
LSA overlap, all sentences in paragraph, mean	0.17	0.11	0.15	0.07	0.016	0.431
Connectives						
Causal connectives incidence	0.24	0.11	0.20	0.08	0.039	0.245
Logical connectives incidence	0.40	0.13	0.31	0.16	0.096	0.049
Situation Model						
Intentional verbs incidence	0.22	0.14	0.28	0.13	-0.058	0.273
Temporal cohesion, tense and aspect repetition, mean	0.77	0.20	0.81	0.10	-0.032	0.620

Finally, researchers compare the judgment group A and the non-judgment group B to verify the above point of view. The results of independent sample t-test show that all of the 12 indexes are greater than 0.05 (shown in Table 3), which are not significant. The above point that alignment effect can enhance the coherence of students' English writing cannot be verified by this test. Although the indexes were not statistically significant, the difference of significant indicators between group AB and group C implied that the difference between judgment group and the non-judgment group may exist. In order to better use the teaching method of continuous writing after reading and improve students' writing ability, it is necessary to study the difference between the judgment group and the non-judgment group in-depth.

Table 3 Comparison of The Differences between the Two Groups

	AA	AS	BA	BS	均值差	显著性
Text Easability Principle Component Scores						
Text Easability PC Narrativity, percentile	0.90	0.10	0.89	0.07	0.012	0.670
Text Easability PC Syntactic simplicity, percentile	0.54	0.30	0.42	0.35	0.120	0.267
Text Easability PC Word concreteness, percentile	0.74	0.24	0.82	0.16	-0.076	0.255
Text Easability PC Referential cohesion, percentile	0.65	0.23	0.62	0.28	0.033	0.695
Text Easability PC Deep cohesion, percentile	0.73	0.25	0.66	0.26	0.074	0.374
Text Easability PC Verb cohesion, percentile	0.45	0.23	0.42	0.23	0.027	0.718
LSA						
LSA overlap, adjacent sentences, mean	0.18	0.08	0.19	0.09	-0.010	0.728
LSA overlap, all sentences in paragraph, mean	0.14	0.07	0.17	0.11	-0.029	0.344
Connectives						
Causal connectives incidence	0.24	0.13	0.24	0.11	0.003	0.944
Logical connectives incidence	0.46	0.15	0.40	0.13	0.055	0.233
Situation Model						
Intentional verbs incidence	0.29	0.14	0.22	0.14	0.063	0.186
Temporal cohesion, tense and aspect repetition, mean	0.82	0.10	0.77	0.20	0.042	0.416

## 5. Conclusion

As one of the quite limited studies on how continuous writing affects the coherence of language, this research will help readers understand what continuous writing is, how continuous writing promotes SLA in China, and whether continuous writing has a positive impact on the coherence of English writing of Chinese ESL learners or not. This research is of great significance not only to the target disciplines and academic researchers, but also to decision makers in universities and SLA teaching. It may contribute to further researches in the following areas: whether continuous writing can be used as an SLA teaching strategy in Chinese universities; whether continuous writing can be used as an English test method; what the advantages and disadvantages of continuous writing make in SLA learning. Continuous writing after reading has no effect on verb cohesion, grammatical habits, sentence overlap and other aspects of writing. And continuous writing after reading can improve the coherence of writing. With the same English foundation, continuous writing after reading can help students tell stories more completely and fluently.

### Limitations and future research

This research only proves the effect of continuous writing after reading in terms of narration and logical aspects on improving the English writing of non-English majors' students in colleges.

The results in this study are time-limited because they are based on the participants' current ideology, which may change over time. In order to obtain more accurate results, the number of participants should be increased, and the scope of research should be expanded, which will increase economic expense and require the help of potential scholarships.

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