

Promoting Language Learning via Writing Assessment in China

The Case of Story Continuation Writing Task*

Wei Ye

School of Foreign Languages and International Business
Guangdong Mechanical & Electrical Polytechnic
Guangzhou, China

Abstract—Like other East Asian countries, China is well known for its test-oriented culture. To prepare for the Gaokao, test-takers take around one year to drill on the assessment tasks. In order to maximize the value of the time and efforts invested, scholars suggested using a learning-oriented task, namely, the story continuation writing task. This paper looks into the evidence supporting the learning effects of the said task, and also the limited literature on its construct validity. Suggestions for future research are proposed at the end of the study.

Keywords—writing assessment; the continuation writing task; Gaokao; learning-oriented task

I. INTRODUCTION

East Asian countries are notoriously well-known for their test-oriented culture. In the context of China, tasks used in the high-stake exams automatically become the dominating learning activities in language classroom (Liu, 2010). For many students, last year in high school is all about the test-preparation, as teaching and learning are all geared to achieve higher scores rather than to develop the underlying language ability. Yet, task drilling barely improved test-takers' language proficiency (Qi, 2004). To make the best use of the large amount of time and efforts invested in test preparation, language testers were suggested adopting tasks with established learning effects (Wang, 2015). This paper examined the writing task used in the current English exams in China and explored the possibility of promoting language learning by integrating a learning-oriented task into the proficiency test.

II. WRITING ASSESSMENT TASKS IN CHINA

Admittedly, writing is an essential language skill and provides crucial evidence about one's language ability (Weigle, 2002). Yet, EFL writing is more of a way of learning and developing fluency in language (Leki, 2001), as learners seldom have the chance to conduct written communications in English. Manchón (2009) posited that for EFL learners, the major function of the writing task is to practice and consolidate linguistic knowledge.

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At the moment, independent writing is widely used in national-level English tests like National Matriculation English Test (NMET), College English Test (CET), and Test for English Majors (TEM), and Public English Test System (PETS). From 2007 to 2015, summary writing was also used in the NMET Guangdong version. A close inspection of the prevailing language tasks in China's EFL classrooms revealed that independent writing and summary task could not effectively promote language learning (Wang, 2013). Wang (2013) argued that these writing tasks failed to initiate language interaction and alignment, a significant mechanism for language acquisition (Pickering & Garrod, 2004).

In other words, the repeated practice of the current writing task type is not of much help for gaining improvement in language proficiency. Support for this argument could be found in You's (2010) intensive study of China's writing test culture. The investigation showed that test-takers had to complete hundreds of mock test paper to improve test performance; and during this process, they just use slightly different content to fill in the pre-set exposition structure. Learning barely took place in this non-communicative language use situations. This is why English high-stake examinations in China need a learning-oriented task that could provide evidence for language proficiency and promote language learning in the prolonged test-taking process at the same time.

III. THE STORY CONTINUATION TASK IN TEACHING CONTEXT

Based on the hypothesis that when extending into the testing situations, learning activities could bring along positive washbacks, scholars proposed using the story continuation writing task (SCWT) in the Gaokao (Wang & Qi, 2013). This is a type of integrated task requiring writers to give an ending to a story by arranging and organizing the contents. Since 2016, the SCWT has been integrated into the Gaokao (Zhejiang Province version). The test performance was measured by a holistic scale covering language aspects like as coherence and cohesion, content development, language accuracy and diversity, the use of connectors and underlined expressions.

Continuation task is not unfamiliar to the Chinese students. The history of continuation writing in China can be

traced back to the Qin dynasty (Yang, 2004), and novel continuation has always been in the focus of literary studies (Duan, 2004; Gao, 2004). The most well-known Chinese novel continuations were probably the large body of continuation novels dedicated to the great classics *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Meanwhile, continuation works written on the basis of classic novels are not uncommon in world literature, such as, *Mrs. de Winter* as a famous continuation for *Rebecca*, and *Scarlet* for *Gone with the Wind*, just to name a few.

Vahapassi(1982) recognized continuation writing as one basic and authentic teaching task. Hyland (2003) saw it as a language scaffolding task that supports learners with rhetorical structures, context, and grammar realizations of meanings. The use of the SCWT thrived in China's English classroom in the early 21st century, when it was put into a national writing campaign promoting long essay writing to enhance the chance of language learning (Wang et al., 2000). Now it has been widely used in English for general purposes (EGP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) courses, as well as in the senior high school and vocational college classroom (Ye, 2016).

Reichelt (1997, 2009) also reported how German students used story continuation task in the L1 and ESL classes, and he considered the task as a type of source-responsible "creative-productive" writing. Ye (2011) held that the process of writers' transferring the source content/language into their continuations was an intertextual practice (Bakhtin, 1986). In his opinion, the SCWT writing was a cross-cultural communicative event, in which Chinese writers were required to analyzed and solve a conflict set within a foreign context. It urged writers to become culturally sensitive to the differences between Chinese and the English-speaking societies.

The effectiveness of the SCWT for language and writing teaching purpose are supported by a body of empirical studies. Wang and his collaborator (2015) compared the written products of two versions of the SCWT (one offering source text in English and the other in Chinese) of twenty-four writers. It was found that EFL learners employed more individual words and lexical chunks from the source when given the English source text. The students were also less likely to commit linguistic errors, as the correct forms could be found in the English source text. Their findings showed that alignment effects did exist in both content and language level in the SCWT writing. Jiang (2015) employed a pretest-treatment-posttest research design in a comparison study on the learning effects of the SCWT and the independent writing task. The results of the posttests (an error correction test and a picture description test) demonstrated that the SCWT treatment over a 12-week teaching period was superior to the independent task treatment for facilitating L2 learning of articles. The authors hence suggested that the SCWT is a useful tool for L2 learning. Using a similar research design, Jiang and Chen (2015) showed that SCWT practice over a long period could generate more improvement in writing accuracy, complexity, and fluency than independent writing task.

IV. CHALLENGES IN ADAPTING THE SCWT IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

There are reasons why writing tasks that lay emphasis on language acquisition seldom enter the arena of language assessment. What testers interested in is eliciting the construct they want to measure, rather than helping writers to acquire language knowledge or skills through the process. Messick(1996) argued that washback involves a set of complexity and uncontrolled variables, hence constitutes sufficient basis for test use. He went on to suggest testers focus on providing strong evidence on construct validity to sustain the use of such learning-oriented task.

Preliminary efforts have been undertaken to investigate the underlying construct of the task. Sterling (2012) explored how two groups of German-as-foreign-language learners completed a story continuation writing task and a story adaptation task, respectively. The respondents paid special attention to the characters settings, the event sequence, and minute details to keep their continuation consistent with the source. Findings indicated that it was the resemblance in the story setting and the requirement of theme continuation that urged writers to incorporate the useful expressions from the source. Acknowledging the impact of the source vocabulary upon their own writing, the majority of the students considered the task an interesting way to support the development of their literacy abilities. They also enjoyed the creative freedom in completing the story.

Zhao (2014) reported a study in which SCWT was employed to elicit L2 creative writing. Think-aloud protocols data were collected and coded in light of the cognitive process model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981). It was found that continuation writing involved writing strategies like planning, monitoring/evaluating, revising processes. Students were encouraged to negotiate meaning in the composing process, and they were given the medium to unfold their imagination. She then concluded that the SCWT had the potential in promoting knowledge construction and learning and should be applied in the assessment of disciplinary writing.

Tang's (2015) study also looked into the content aspect of the SCWT composing. She analyzed the source text in view of the systemic functional concepts including field, tenor and mode and suggested writers pay attention to an array of issues, including the nature of the event, the relationships among the characters, and the stylistic feature.

Besides the above qualitative investigations, quantitative studies were conducted to investigate the language abilities underpinning the SCWT writing. Wang & Qi (2013) collected two hundred senior three students' scores on independent writing, reading, and the SCWT. They used a holistic scale to measure test performance in terms of coherence with the source, variety and accuracy of vocabulary and syntax, and the use of connectors. Correlation analyses showed that the SCWT scores were moderately associated with test-takers' reading (.535) and writing scores (.680), indicating the task measured reading and writing abilities simultaneously.

Yet, none of the above studies demonstrated clear-cut evidence on the construct composites of the SCWT. It remained unclear what kinds of language knowledge and strategy are crucial for completing the task. The peril in employing the current intuition-based rating scale is that test fairness for the tens of thousands of EFL learners preparing for the test every year could not be guaranteed.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper explores the possibility in adapting a learning-oriented task in the English examinations in China. While the writing assessment tasks currently in use failed to bring along positive washbacks, the SCWT has testified effects in promoting language learning. Yet, the small number of construct studies so far was insufficient in supporting its testing application, as the underlying construct composites remain unclear.

Future researches are expected to use qualitative methods to investigate the composing process, as demonstrated by the studies presented above, to find out the significant factors facilitating task completion, and quantitative methods to explore the hidden relationship among those factors to reveal the major construct composites impact of the SCWT test performance. In addition, empirical studies examining the impacts of its test use should be undertaken to provide support for the washback argument.

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