

# A Comparative Study on Continuation Task Writing Output Among Senior High School Students with Different English Proficiency Levels

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## ABSTRACT

This study compares the continuation task writing of Chinese senior high school students across three proficiency levels (high, intermediate, low). Sixty participants completed a narrative continuation task, and their writings were analyzed for syntactic complexity, lexical richness, accuracy, and discourse coherence. Results revealed significant disparities: high-proficiency students produced more complex and accurate sentences, used a richer vocabulary, and constructed more coherent narratives. Intermediate students showed basic competence but exhibited a trade-off between complexity and accuracy. Low-proficiency outputs were constrained by simple structures, repetitive lexicon, and frequent errors, leading to fragmented discourse. The findings confirm that general English proficiency is a critical determinant of continuation task performance. The study advocates for differentiated instruction with targeted scaffolding to address the distinct needs of each proficiency level.

## KEYWORDS

Continuation task; English proficiency; Second language writing; Syntactic complexity; Lexical richness

## 1 Introduction

The integration of reading and writing skills has long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective language learning, and the Continuation Task represents a significant innovation in this domain, particularly within the context of English education in China. As a key component of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in several regions, this task requires students to read an incomplete story and then compose a logical and coherent continuation to bring the narrative to a close. Its theoretical appeal lies in its potential to induce a state of "alignment," where learners subconsciously assimilate and reproduce the linguistic patterns, rhetorical structures, and lexical choices present in the source text, thereby facilitating a more natural and contextualized form of language acquisition. The pedagogical value of the task is considered substantial, as it merges comprehensive input with productive output, demanding a deep engagement with the text. However, the successful implementation of this task in diverse classroom settings necessitates a nuanced understanding of how learners with varying linguistic resources approach the challenge. While existing research has often focused on validating the efficacy of the continuation task as a whole or comparing it to other writing formats, there remains a relative scarcity of fine-grained, empirical studies that systematically deconstruct and compare the writing outputs of students across a broad spectrum of proficiency within the same educational context. Simply knowing that the task is beneficial is insufficient; educators need to know what exactly distinguishes a high-proficiency continuation from a low-proficiency one in terms of concrete linguistic features. Such insights are indispensable for diagnosing student weaknesses, informing instructional design, and developing tiered assessment criteria.

To address this gap, the present study undertakes a comparative analysis of continuation tasks produced by senior high school students stratified into high, intermediate, and low English proficiency groups. It moves beyond a holistic evaluation to examine specific, measurable indices of writing quality. The research is guided by the following questions: Firstly, what are the key differences in syntactic complexity and lexical richness evident in the writings of students across the three proficiency levels? Secondly, how does the rate of grammatical accuracy vary among these groups when engaged in the same writing task? Thirdly, and more qualitatively, what distinct strategies and challenges are observable in how these students construct discourse coherence to create a unified and comprehensible narrative? The answers to these questions are expected to yield a detailed profile of proficiency-level-specific performance, offering evidence-based insights that can empower teachers to move beyond one-size-fits-all instruction and provide more personalized and effective writing support.

## 2 Literature review

The theoretical foundation of the Continuation Task is deeply rooted in the psycholinguistic concept of "alignment" or "interactive alignment" as proposed by Pickering and Garrod (2004). Their model, originally developed for spoken dialogue, suggests that successful communication involves the automatic synchronization of linguistic representations between interlocutors at various levels, including lexical choice, syntax, and situation models. Applied to the written context of the continuation task by scholars like Wang (2010), this theory posits that the reading phase primes the learner with specific linguistic material. When the student writes the continuation, they align their own language production with this primed input, consciously or unconsciously adopting the story's style, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. This

process is believed to create a fertile ground for acquisition, pushing learners to use language beyond their current steady state. The evaluation of the writing output from such a task inevitably draws upon the established constructs of second language (L2) writing assessment. Decades of research have consistently highlighted several core dimensions that reliably distinguish writing quality and developmental stages. Syntactic Complexity refers to the ability to use a wide range of grammatical structures and to combine ideas into increasingly sophisticated sentences. It is not merely about writing longer sentences, but about effectively using subordination and embedding to express complex relationships between ideas. Common measures include the mean length of T-units and the number of clauses per T-unit, with higher proficiency writers typically demonstrating higher values.

Lexical Richness is another crucial dimension, encompassing the diversity, sophistication, and density of vocabulary. A writer with a rich lexicon can avoid repetition and express nuances of meaning. This is often measured through indices like Type-Token Ratio (and its corrected versions to account for text length) and the percentage of low-frequency or academic words used. Grammatical Accuracy, measured by the proportion of error-free clauses or T-units, remains a fundamental, though challenging, goal for L2 learners. The development of accuracy is often nonlinear and can compete for cognitive resources with complexity and fluency, a phenomenon known as the Trade-Off Hypothesis. Finally, Discourse Coherence is the hallmark of a well-structured text. It transcends sentence-level correctness to address how ideas are woven together into a unified, logical, and easily comprehensible whole. While cohesive devices like conjunctions, pronouns, and lexical chains are the tangible tools for building coherence, the overall thematic progression and logical flow of the narrative are equally important. Analyzing coherence often requires a more qualitative, interpretive approach. This study synthesizes these established dimensions—complexity, richness, accuracy, and coherence—to create a comprehensive framework for comparing continuation task outputs across proficiency levels, thereby contributing a stratified and detailed perspective to the existing body of literature on this specific pedagogical tool.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants and grouping

The participants for this study were recruited from a cohort of 200 Grade 11 students at a standard public senior high school in China. A total of 60 students, forming a representative sample, were selected and divided into three distinct groups based on their performance on a recent school-wide standardized English examination, which is rigorously designed to align with the national curriculum and provides a reliable proxy for general English proficiency. The High-Proficiency Group (HPG) consisted of 20 students whose scores fell within the top 25th percentile. The Intermediate-Proficiency Group (IPG) was composed of 20 students from the middle 50th percentile of the score distribution. The Low-Proficiency Group (LPG) included 20 students from the bottom 25th percentile. This stratification ensured a clear distinction in the overall language ability among the three comparison groups.

#### 3.2 Data Collection instrument and procedure

The data collection was conducted during a regular class session under controlled conditions to ensure validity. The instrument used was a narrative continuation task prompt, adapted from a previous NMET sample to guarantee authenticity and appropriate difficulty level. The prompt featured a 350-word story in English about a hiker who becomes lost in a forest and discovers a mysterious, abandoned cabin. The narrative was cut off at a moment of high tension with the sentence: "As I pushed the creaky door open, I saw something that made my blood run cold..." Participants were given 40 minutes to read the prompt carefully and then write a coherent and creative continuation of at least 150 words to complete the story. The use of any external aids such as dictionaries or electronic devices was strictly prohibited to ensure that the writing reflected their own unaided ability.

#### 3.3 Data analysis methods

The collected compositions, amounting to approximately 10,000 words in total, were transcribed for systematic analysis. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a multi-faceted understanding of the differences in writing output.

For the quantitative analysis, the texts were analyzed using a set of established measures. Syntactic Complexity was operationalized through two indices: the Mean Length of T-unit (MLT), calculated as the total number of words divided by the total number of T-units, and the Clauses per T-unit (C/T) ratio. A T-unit is defined as one main clause plus any subordinate clauses attached to it. Lexical Richness was assessed using the Corrected Type-Token Ratio (CTTR), which is a robust measure of vocabulary diversity, and Lexical Sophistication, which was measured as the percentage of words from the Academic Word List (AWL) present in each text. Grammatical Accuracy was quantified as the ratio of Error-Free T-units to the total number of T-units (EFT/T). All errors in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics were taken into account. The quantitative data for these measures were calculated for each student and then averaged for each group. A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted using SPSS software to determine if the differences between the group

means were statistically significant.

For the qualitative analysis, the focus was on Discourse Coherence. This involved a close reading and content analysis of the texts to identify and compare the types, frequency, and functional effectiveness of cohesive devices used by students in each group. This included examining logical connectors, pronominal reference, lexical chains, and ellipsis. Furthermore, the overall narrative structure—how students managed the opening, development, and resolution of the story—was evaluated to understand their ability to construct a logically flowing and unified text. Representative excerpts from each proficiency group were selected for in-depth illustrative comparison to highlight the contrasting strategies and challenges.

#### 4 Results and findings

The analysis of the data revealed a clear and consistent pattern of differentiation across all dimensions of writing quality, strongly correlating with the students' overall English proficiency level.

In terms of Syntactic Complexity, the High-Proficiency Group significantly outperformed the other two groups. Their writings exhibited a notably greater mean length of T-units and a higher clauses-per-T-unit ratio. This indicates their ability and willingness to craft complex sentences, making frequent and effective use of subordinate clauses, such as adverbial clauses of time and reason, and relative clauses to add descriptive detail. For instance, they commonly produced sentences like, "While my heart pounded with a mixture of fear and curiosity, I took a cautious step forward, my flashlight beam illuminating the dusty interior of the cabin which appeared to have been untouched for decades." In contrast, the Intermediate-Proficiency Group primarily used compound sentences or simple sentences with occasional, and often awkward, attempts at subordination. Their writing was generally comprehensible but lacked syntactic variety. The Low-Proficiency Group relied almost exclusively on simple, short sentences, frequently strung together with the coordinating conjunctions "and," "but," or "so." Their output was characterized by a repetitive, choppy rhythm, for example, "I open the door. I see a monster. I am very scared. I run away."

The dimension of Lexical Richness showed a parallel trend. The High-Proficiency Group demonstrated a significantly higher Corrected Type-Token Ratio, indicating a wider variety of words used without repetition. More strikingly, their texts contained a higher percentage of words from the Academic Word List and other low-frequency vocabulary, such as "apprehension," "illuminated," "dilapidated," "permeated," and "trepidation." The Intermediate Group used a core, general-service vocabulary adequately but showed limited range, often repeating high-frequency verbs and nouns. The Low-Proficiency Group's lexicon was severely restricted, relying on a small set of basic words, which led to considerable repetition and a lack of descriptive power. Grammatical Accuracy, as measured by the ratio of error-free T-units, presented one of the most stark contrasts. The High-Proficiency Group maintained a high level of accuracy, with most grammatical structures, including complex verb tenses and article usage, being correctly deployed. The Intermediate Group exhibited a considerable number of errors, particularly in subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and prepositional usage, especially when they attempted more complex sentences. The writings of the Low-Proficiency Group were riddled with errors across all grammatical domains, including basic sentence structure, word order, and verb formation, which at times hindered the comprehensibility of their narratives.

The qualitative analysis of Discourse Coherence further underscored these divides. The High-Proficiency Group constructed narratives that were not only cohesive but also coherent on a macro-structural level. They successfully established a clear plotline, managed narrative tension, and provided a logical resolution. They employed a diverse array of cohesive devices effectively, using synonyms for lexical chains, advanced logical connectors like "nevertheless," "consequently," and "meanwhile," and maintained consistent pronoun reference and tense throughout. The Intermediate Group managed basic coherence, primarily through simple sequential connectors like "and then," "so," and "because," but their stories sometimes showed logical jumps or underdeveloped plot points. Pronoun reference was sometimes ambiguous. The Low-Proficiency Group struggled immensely with creating a coherent text. Their stories often read as a disjointed list of events with minimal connection. The use of cohesive devices was sparse and often incorrect, leading to a fragmented and sometimes confusing narrative where the logical progression of events was difficult to follow.

#### 5 Discussion

The results of this study offer compelling and multi-faceted evidence that a student's general English proficiency is a paramount factor determining the quality of their output in a continuation task. The disparities observed across syntactic, lexical, accuracy, and discursive dimensions are not minor variations but fundamental differences in writing capability.

The superior performance of the High-Proficiency Group across the board aligns with theories of language automatization. Their extensive linguistic knowledge appears to be highly accessible and proceduralized, allowing them to manage the cognitive demands of the task with relative ease. They can simultaneously focus on generating creative content, manipulating complex syntactic structures, selecting precise vocabulary, and monitoring for grammatical accuracy. For these learners, the continuation task seems to function as intended by the alignment theory; they possess

the sufficient underlying competence to notice, assimilate, and creatively redeploy the sophisticated language models provided in the prompt.

The performance of the Intermediate-Proficiency Group vividly illustrates the ongoing challenges of the L2 learner. They possess the foundational knowledge to construct meaningful text but operate under significant cognitive constraints. Their performance provides support for the Trade-Off Hypothesis, which posits that learners have limited attentional capacity. When the IPG students attempt to generate more complex ideas or syntactic structures, their focus on grammatical accuracy often wanes, leading to a higher frequency of errors. Conversely, when they focus on being accurate, their writing tends to revert to simpler, safer constructions. This group is in a crucial transitional stage where targeted practice is needed to consolidate and automatize their knowledge.

The output of the Low-Proficiency Group indicates a fundamental gap in core linguistic knowledge. Their writing is largely built around "islands of reliability"—memorized chunks and simple sentence frames that they can produce with minimal planning. The cognitive load of simply encoding their ideas into basic English sentences is so high that they have little to no capacity left for considering complexity, vocabulary variety, or overarching coherence. The alignment effect for this group is likely minimal, as they lack the grammatical and lexical foundation to align with the complex input. The continuation task, for them, becomes an exercise in survival, relying on minimal resources to convey a basic sequence of events.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are profound. They argue decisively against a uniform approach to teaching and assessing the continuation task. For Low-Proficiency students, instruction must focus on building foundational grammar and expanding their core vocabulary through extensive reading and structured sentence-level practice. Scaffolding, such as providing word banks, sentence starters, or graphic organizers for plot development, is essential. For Intermediate students, the focus should shift to focused practice on sentence combining, editing strategies, and conscious vocabulary expansion to help them bridge the gap between their receptive and productive knowledge. For High-Proficiency students, instruction can challenge them to refine their style, use more nuanced cohesive devices, and develop more sophisticated narrative techniques. By tailoring instruction in this way, educators can ensure that the continuation task serves as an effective developmental tool for every student, regardless of their starting point.

## 6 Conclusion

This comparative study has systematically delineated the distinct profiles of continuation task writing output produced by senior high school students at high, intermediate, and low levels of English proficiency. The findings present a clear picture: as proficiency increases, so does the ability to produce linguistically sophisticated, accurate, and coherent narratives. The progression is qualitative, moving from simple, error-prone, and fragmented texts to complex, fluent, and well-structured stories. The study confirms that the continuation task is a sensitive measure of overall language proficiency, revealing strengths and weaknesses across multiple domains of writing competence.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study is important. The sample, while carefully selected, was drawn from a single school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the research provides a snapshot in time rather than an account of developmental trajectories. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track how individual students' continuation task performance evolves over time. Additionally, incorporating think-aloud protocols or stimulated recall interviews could offer invaluable insights into the online cognitive processes and decision-making strategies that students employ during the reading and writing phases of the task. In conclusion, the continuation task holds great promise as an integrated language learning and assessment tool. However, its potential is best realized when teachers are equipped with a deep understanding of how proficiency shapes its output. By recognizing the characteristic profiles of writers at different levels, educators can move beyond generic feedback and implement a differentiated pedagogy that provides the specific support and challenge each student needs to advance their L2 writing abilities. This research contributes to that understanding, providing a detailed map of the terrain of proficiency in the context of the continuation task.

## About the Author

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