

Exploration of College English Writing Teaching Mode Based on the “Continuation Theory”

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Abstract

“Continuation Theory”, an innovative language learning framework rooted in the “alignment effect”, leverages incomplete discourse within contextualized settings to prompt learners to produce creative completions. This theory has gained growing recognition and pedagogical adoption among Chinese scholars; one of its direct applications lies in advancing second language (L2) acquisition and enhancing the efficiency of L2 instruction. This paper centers on the “reading-then-writing” approach, aiming to explore a novel college English writing pedagogy guided by Continuation Theory. Through empirical experimentation, this study demonstrates that, in application-oriented universities, strengthening the synergistic interplay between instructional materials, teaching methodologies, and teachers’ multi-tiered scaffolding can optimize the efficacy of reading-then-writing tasks—ultimately elevating the accuracy and linguistic sophistication of students’ written output.

Keywords

Continuation Theory, Alignment Effect, Language Teaching

1. Introduction

The “Continuation Theory” was formally proposed by Professor Wang Chuming in 2016. Since then, the Chinese language education has witnessed a growing focus on continuation tasks, with a steady stream of related theoretical and empirical research emerging, aiming to uncover the impact of this approach on language learning and validate its effectiveness. This paper endeavors to examine how, within the setting of college English classrooms in application-oriented universities, where students exhibit diverse learning levels and abilities, improved teaching outcomes can be attained in read-to-write continuation tasks

by reinforcing teaching materials, methodologies, and leveraging the scaffolding role of teachers, based on the theoretical guidance of the “Continuation Theory”.

This paper is mainly divided into four parts; the first part is introduction. The second section introduces and delves into the “Continuation Theory”, highlighting its theoretical foundation—the alignment effects, and its application within language classroom instruction, particularly in Chinese English classrooms. The third section focuses on the construction of multiple scaffolds for writing instruction from the perspective of the “Continuation Theory”. It encompasses the experimental context, research questions, and an exploration into the establishment of cognitive scaffolds, genre-based scaffolds, language expression scaffolds, and peer review scaffolds within English writing classrooms in Chinese applied universities. By providing appropriate guidance at various stages of the writing process, this approach aims to enhance students’ writing proficiency and sense of achievement more effectively. The fourth part is summary and recommendations.

2. The “Continuation Theory”

2.1. Theoretical Foundation and Learning Enhancement Effect of the “Continuation Theory”

From the linguistic theoretical perspective, the language acquisition perspective advocated by “Continuation Theory” aligns with the fundamental principles of usage-based linguistics today. Our language knowledge stems from communicative usage experiences, and language use invariably transpires within a contextual framework (cf. Tomasello, 2003; Tyler, 2010). However, when it comes to elucidating the mechanisms of language acquisition, the “Continuation Theory” possesses unique insights. It underscores the utilization of incomplete utterances in dialogical interactions for effective language learning. Learners comprehend such utterances while creatively completing and expanding upon them, thereby experiencing language use, augmenting linguistic representations, and enhancing language proficiency. This learning process entails the seamless integration of language comprehension and production, with the bridging of these two components serving as the cognitive foundation upon which the “Continuation Theory” explains its facilitative learning mechanisms (Tomasello, 2003). A pivotal characteristic of language use in dialogue is the speaker’s need to continually generate new content while simultaneously ensuring that linguistic expressions keep pace with the ongoing evolution of this content. This agile adaptation of language to thought is intricately linked to “continuation” throughout its developmental trajectory. There exists a perpetual asymmetry between individuals’ language comprehension and production levels, with the former consistently surpassing the latter. “Continuation”, in this context, fosters an intersection between comprehension and output. What is comprehended originates from others’ expressions, whereas what is “continued” constitutes autonomous creation immediately subsequent to

comprehending the preceding text. The disparity in their levels gives rise to a leveling effect—or alignment effect—in their interaction.

Alignment effects serve as the primary theoretical foundation for post-reading continuation tasks. Alignment refers to the convergence of the produced language with the understood language, aligning language output with language input, flattening from low to high, and narrowing the gap. The alignment effect is essentially the flattening effect, also known as the learning effect, encompassing an imitation component that involves the repeated application of other people's language, and it serves to consolidate or expand learners' language representation. During the alignment process, if others possess high language proficiency, learners with lower proficiency will benefit from the leveling effect of alignment, rapidly enhancing their language proficiency.

Since the 21st century, an increasing number of researchers in second language acquisition and psycholinguistics have begun to focus on the phenomenon of synergy in language. Due to differing perspectives, various researchers hold varying opinions on this matter. [Pickering and Branigan \(1998\)](#) proposed that structural priming involves learners creatively applying previous expressions to new contexts during continuation writing, representing a manifestation of language alignment. [Atkinson et al. \(2007\)](#) extended the concept of alignment from general learning activities to the field of second language acquisition, arguing that alignment occurs not only between individuals but also between individuals and their surrounding material environment, emphasizing the pivotal role of alignment in second language development.

Since “continuation” and “understanding” often occur within the same topic, driven by communicative needs, the alignment effects can enhance the likelihood of repeatedly using the previously mentioned language structures (i.e., structural priming). When conversing with native speakers, structural priming can significantly enhance the language proficiency of second language learners. Based on this reasoning, language evolves and develops by continuously balancing learners' output and comprehension abilities, with “continuation” serving as the driving force behind this synergy ([Zhou & Wang, 2023](#)). Therefore, as long as language learning involves “continuation”, it not only fosters interaction between comprehension and production but also introduces additional features that promote learning. These include: 1) Evoking an endogenous motivation to express ideas. Stimulated by the preceding text, learners' communicative willingness is activated, enabling them to have something to say and wanting to say, thereby stimulating language use. 2) Accompanying context. The preceding text provides context for the “continuation”, serving as a scaffolding to support language learning and usage. It not only enhances language comprehension but also constrains the expansion and evolution of the “continuation” content. Furthermore, it facilitates the organic integration of language form with the appropriate context, increasing the likelihood of language learning being applied effectively. 3) Alleviating language production pressure. The leveling effect arises from “continuation”, encouraging

learners to employ the language structures mentioned in the preceding text to express their thoughts, thereby enhancing communication efficiency, reducing the room for errors, and lowering the error rate in language usage. 4) Mitigating native language interference. For second language learners, “continuation” in conjunction with the correct usage of the preceding text inevitably mitigates native language interference, making language expression more authentic (Xu & Chen, 2023). 5) Providing a cohesive template. Learners seamlessly follow the discourse, naturally extending the content and structure of the preceding text. This not only refines their language skills but also bolsters their ability to express coherent and articulate discourse. 6) Enhancing attention. “Continuation” emphasizes the contrast effect, making it easier for learners to perceive the disparity between their language proficiency and the preceding text (noticing the gap, see Swain (1985)), which they can gradually bridge through “continuation”. 7) Refining language in discourse use. Language use is embedded within discourse, and what “continuation” accomplishes, expands, and creates is a discourse rich in contextual information, rather than isolated sentences stripped from their discourse context. The aforementioned learning-enhancing features encompass the primary variables that influence language acquisition, all of which can be activated through “continuation”.

2.2. Application of “Continuation Theory”

In the realm of foreign language learning, learners’ language production level, whether oral or written, typically lags behind their comprehension level. Despite possessing a certain amount of knowledge, foreign language learners often struggle to retrieve and apply it timely and appropriately to express their thoughts. This asymmetry has long been a challenge for the foreign language community. Given the realities of foreign language teaching in China, the core of promoting learning through “continuation” lies in seamlessly integrating language understanding and production, triggering language alignment effects, and effectively transforming others’ language into one’s own (Lin & Huang, 2023).

One direct application of the “Continuation Theory” is to advance second language learning and enhance the efficacy of second language instruction. For effective implementation, designing language learning tasks centered around “continuation” is crucial. Designing should commence from the foundational principles of “continuation” theory, focusing on both language understanding and production. **Figure 1** illustrates a design that fosters learning through “continuation”, emphasizing the interplay between “continuation” and language learning. “Continuation” functions as a bridge between understanding and output, with understanding primarily achieved through listening and reading, and output primarily through speaking and writing. This paper will concentrate on the transition from reading to writing.

“Read-to-write continuation task” offers numerous advantages: selecting a story with engaging content and moderate language difficulty, omitting the end-

ing, and allowing students to continue writing to complete the narrative. This task entails creating new content based on the understanding of the original work, interacting and collaborating with the original through repeated readings, integrating the continuation seamlessly with the original, and thereby producing a leveling effect. The application of this task in foreign language teaching can compensate for the scarcity of opportunities to communicate with native speakers in a foreign language environment, while also playing a pivotal role in enhancing precise expression in foreign languages through writing.

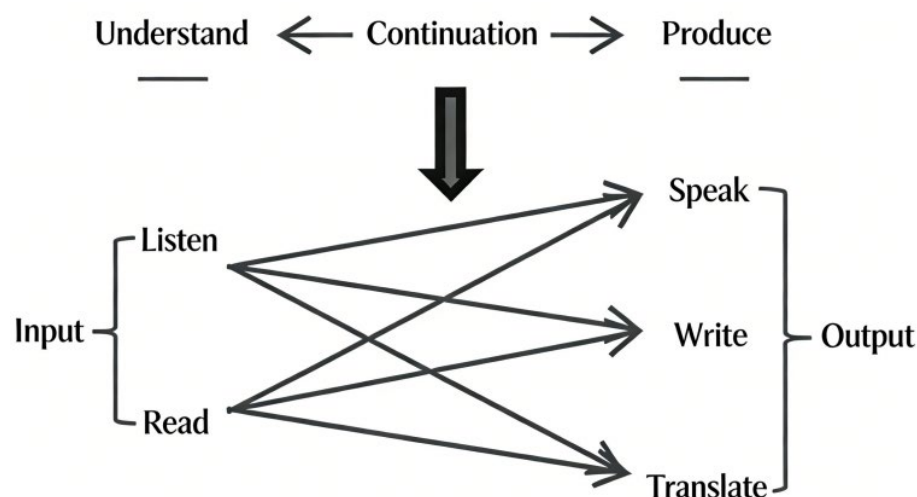


Figure 1. Continuation-based learning design.

In China's foreign language teaching context, reading and writing are typically trained in isolation, with intensive reading often employed as a teaching method. The language difficulty of the texts is relatively high, and after detailed explanations, they are no longer conducive to continuation writing. To fully harness the learning-enhancing effects of intensive reading texts, teachers can consider selecting reading materials that share similar themes and genres with the intensive reading texts but feature easier language. By omitting the ending and encouraging students to continue writing after reading, they can strive to incorporate good sentence patterns and new vocabulary from the intensive reading texts, further refining their language proficiency on the foundation of comprehending those texts.

The approach of writing and completing after reading tightly integrates output and understanding, reinforcing the interaction and coordination between the two, and fostering language imitation and use. Continuations unlock learners' learning potential through expansion, empowering them to unleash their imagination, extend the content of the original work, and secure more opportunities to articulate ideas through language, thereby fostering coherent language expression. Continuations also ignite learners' intrinsic motivation through creative means, consistently generating fresh content and sustaining a desire to communicate.

3. Construction of Multiple Scaffolds in Writing Course Instruction from the Perspective of the “Continuation Theory”

3.1. Background of the Teaching Experiment

3.1.1. Teaching Subjects and Course Arrangement

The teaching subjects of this study are second-year non-English major students from an applied university in Guangdong Province. Specifically, there are 70 students in the experimental class and another 70 in the reference class. To ensure the validity of the experiment, all writing practice tasks (which served as the data sources for the study) were completed in class. In line with the instructional design, both the experimental group and the control group received preliminary training in essay writing (covering pre-writing preparation, outline drafting, etc.) and completed a pre-test during the first six weeks of the semester, with identical teaching arrangements for both groups. Starting from the seventh week, when the course shifted to the study of four English essay genres (narration, description, exposition, and argumentation), the experimental group received multi-scaffold-assisted instruction guided by the Continuation Theory: based on the teaching content of these four genres, the experimental group was assigned one in-class reading-then-writing task every two weeks. Meanwhile, the control group received semi-traditional writing instruction via an online platform, with in-class continuation tasks arranged as well. The same CET-4¹ essay prompt was used for both the pre-test and post-test of the two groups, requiring students to read a provided material before completing the essay writing task.

3.1.2. Research Questions

The continuation theory posits that continuation tasks can ignite learners’ imagination, spark their expressive desires, emphasize the significance of context, elicit language activation, minimize linguistic errors, and ensure coherent content progression (Wang, 2024). Currently, in application-oriented undergraduate universities, some students exhibit relatively weak foundations, primarily manifested in the following four aspects: limited vocabulary and a tendency to confuse written and oral expressions; a prominent Chinglish phenomenon, with words used in a non-idiomatic manner; discourse cohesion that lacks naturalness or a reliance on online templates without selecting cohesive devices based on the text’s actual needs; and an absence of critical thinking, with the central idea of articles failing to reflect students’ unique perspectives. Therefore, this study aims to explore how, amidst the uneven learning abilities and proficiency levels among English majors in application-oriented universities, enhanced teaching materials, methodologies, and the scaffolding role of instructors can facilitate more effective outcomes in Continuation tasks.

¹The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), administered and conducted by the National Education Examinations Authority under the Ministry of Education of China, is a nationwide standardized exam designed to serve educational purposes.

3.2. Designing Multiple Scaffolds to Facilitate Continuation Writing Tasks

3.2.1. Pre-Class Input Stage—Establishing Cognitive Scaffolding

Prior to class, students in the experimental group watched micro-lecture videos and courseware uploaded by teachers in advance on an online platform, pondered over pre-class questions embedded in the courseware, and read classic article excerpts corresponding to the genre they were studying. By delivering fundamental concepts through micro-lectures, students were better prepared for the formal materials covered in class. Pre-class reading centered around the week's learning theme, aiding students in accumulating phrases and constructing a knowledge framework. Taking narrative writing as an example, the micro-lecture videos and courseware elucidated narrative central ideas, "contradictions" within narratives, and the linguistic characteristics of narrative writing. The reading assignment given by the teacher was Robert Fulghum's "*A Different Kind of Cinderella Story*", a piece with a clear narrative, accessible language, and rich psychological descriptions, making it ideal for students' pre-class preparation. To ensure accountability, the teacher instructed students to submit their reading feedback (encompassing language collocations, phrases, key sentence structures, etc.) to the teacher in document form via a mobile learning application on their phones. Students in the control group were also assigned the same pre-class preview task of watching micro-lecture videos and courseware uploaded by teachers in advance on the online platform.

Students in the control class are also assigned the same pre-class preview task: to watch micro-lecture videos and courseware uploaded by teachers in advance on the online platform, and to ponder the pre-questions provided in the courseware. However, this preview process lacks the component of text reading and feedback. In other words, while the online platform is utilized to enhance preview efficiency, it does not encompass the input of specific language materials.

3.2.2. In-Class Reading and Discussion Stage—Leveraging the "Original Text" for Synergistic Effects and Constructing a Genre Structure Scaffold

Due to limited class time, the articles read in class are kept relatively concise, typically within 400 words. The endings of these articles are omitted, prompting students to engage in continuation writing after reading. Taking narrative writing as an example, the reading material for the class is Andrew McCuaig's "*The Wallet*", with its ending removed. At this juncture, the conceptual input completed during the pre-class preview serves as a cognitive scaffold, enabling students to automatically recall the articles they read beforehand. Following in-class reading, students engage in group discussions for fifteen minutes based on questions posed by the teacher. These questions encompass content introduced in the micro-lecture videos, such as identifying the six elements of the novel, determining the story's theme, and locating the climax. This allows students to discuss the language characteristics of the story in class and construct a knowledge system through resource

sharing. Similarly, students in the control class pose questions in class, pertaining to content from the pre-class preview videos and courseware, to gain a deeper understanding of the chapter's knowledge points. In subsequent in-class reading sessions, students read the truncated articles in a traditional manner, while the teacher guides them to meticulously analyze the article structure, material content, central idea, and language style.

3.2.3. Teacher Q&A and In-Class Continuation Writing Stage—Constructing Language Expression Scaffold

After group discussions in the experimental class, the teacher addresses the parts that students have reported the most difficulties with, such as discourse structure and cohesive devices not covered in previous readings. Through question-and-answer sessions, the teacher immerses students in the context and initiates their independent exploration. At this stage, the teacher's role as an emotional scaffold primarily involves acting as an enlightener, guide, and helper, ultimately enabling students to analyze independently and progressively ascend the conceptual framework. Building on pre-class input, in-class reading, discussion, and teacher explanation, experimental class students utilize words, phrases, and syntactic structures accumulated from the reading materials to continue writing. Prior to writing, students already possess content related to the topic in their minds, enabling even those with weaker foundations to have a foundation to rely on when completing the continuation writing, thereby reducing writing anxiety. Students in the control class also undertake the continuation writing task, with the style, theme, and structure matching those of the experimental class. However, the teacher serves as the primary speaker throughout the explanation, resulting in students lacking the assistance of a language expression scaffold in the continuation writing section.

3.2.4. Post-Class Feedback Stage—Constructing a Scaffold for Peer Evaluation

Upon completing their continuation writing, students do not immediately submit their work to the teacher for review. Instead, they engage in peer evaluation, providing comments on each other's work. Initially, students exhibit reluctance to complete the evaluation, unsure of how to proceed. They often resort to simple sentences in English or even Chinese to express their preference or dislike for their peers' continuation writing. Regardless of the comments' quality or the accuracy of the judgments, the teacher should offer encouragement at this stage. In this teaching experiment, a process assessment is also implemented, with students eligible for extra points in their regular grades for providing evaluations. In the subsequent review phase, the teacher provides comments for both the continuation writer and the reviewer of the same assignment, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the continuation content and assessing the accuracy of the reviewer's judgments and expressions. The teacher's comments and feedback also function as scaffolds at this point. After completing three assignments, some stu-

dents are able to imitate the teacher's comments and provide more objective evaluations of their peers' writing. The author believes that this constitutes a form of discourse collaboration, akin to a kind of "continuation writing". When students are capable of evaluating others' articles, they will also consciously reflect on their own continuation writing content and conduct self-evaluation. In contrast, students in the control group do not engage in peer evaluation after completing their writing. After the teacher reviews and grades their work, they are instructed to make revisions. In other words, although the same article is submitted in the end, the control group lacks the assistance of multiple cognitive scaffolds throughout the learning process, including pre-class reading and feedback, classroom discussion and in-class continuation writing, and peer evaluation.

3.3. Experimental Results and Teaching Reflection

3.3.1. Experimental Results

A post-test was conducted in accordance with the 16th week of the teaching design. The pre-test and post-test primarily employed T-unit (Minimum Terminable Unit) data to evaluate students' continuation assignments, as T-units serve as a metric for stylistic and syntactic maturity. Specifically, this evaluation encompassed the ratio of error-free T-units to the total number of T-units (error-free T-units/T-units), the ratio of total errors to total T-units (errors/T-units), the ratio of total clauses to total T-units (clauses/T-units), the ratio of dependent clauses to total clauses (dependent clauses/clauses), and the average number of T-units per 100 words (T-units/100 words).

Table 1. Comparison of English writing proficiency between the experimental group and the control group.

Test Standard		Pre-test average value		Average value of the two post measurements	
Language Accuracy	Error-free T-units/T-units	0.65	0.52	0.84	0.87
	Errors/T-units	0.41	0.33	0.18	0.19
Language Complexity (Syntactic Maturity)	Clause/T-units	0.23	0.24	0.43	0.54
	Dependent clauses/clause	0.35	0.33	0.42	0.66
	T-units per 100 words	7.05	8.02	9.32	10.3

Table 1 reveals that both the control class and the experimental class exhibited improvements in language accuracy. Prior to the experiment, the experimental class demonstrated lower language accuracy compared to the control class; however, the average values of the two post-tests for CET-4 essay writing indicated a significant increase for the experimental class. When comparing the post-test results of both classes, the difference was insignificant. This suggests that both multiple scaffolding-assisted continuation exercises and traditional continuation exercises were effective in enhancing students' language accuracy in this experiment. In terms of language complexity, the syntactic maturity of the experimental class

significantly improved after undergoing multiple scaffolding-assisted continuation training. The number of clauses increased, and the T-unit count per 100 words surpassed 10. In this regard, the control class showed less improvement compared to the experimental class. The pre-test and post-test data of the experimental group indicated a statistically significant difference between the two sets of production data ($p < 0.05$).

During this teaching practice, 11% of the students in the experimental class voluntarily revised their work after peer evaluation, even though it was not mandatory, and their second submission was notably better than the first. Additionally, 5% of the students actively engaged with the teacher during breaks to discuss issues they encountered while completing their assignments. On average, 3% of the students had disagreements during peer evaluations each time they continued writing, and the teacher provided arbitration results during the review process. To gain insights into the experimental class's performance, the end-of-term survey questionnaire specifically focused on whether multiple scaffolds had a notable learning-enhancing effect. The results indicated that 95% of the students strongly supported peer evaluation, believing that the combination of student peer evaluation and teacher evaluation facilitated knowledge internalization and understanding. Teacher collaboration is crucial, and such scaffolds are indispensable in application-oriented universities. Essay writing constitutes creative language output (Li, 2024). For students with a relatively weak academic foundation, maximizing learning efficiency within limited course time necessitates "scaffolding" from multiple sources.

The selection of continuation materials is pivotal in determining the smoothness of students' cognitive processes in subsequent stages and the effectiveness of various scaffolds. Compared to traditional teaching methods, this approach undoubtedly increases teachers' workload. Furthermore, an accurate analysis of learning resources provides the most reliable and effective foundation for teachers to implement multiple scaffolding-assisted teaching. Teachers should make adequate preparations at the beginning of the semester or before class. Therefore, to address the aforementioned challenges, it is imperative for the teaching team to coordinate and collaborate under a unified understanding of this approach.

The end-of-term survey questionnaire revealed that continuing writing reduced students' anxiety, increased their interest in learning, and significantly altered the length of their articles. However, it also posed difficulties for 6% of the students in writing article introductions. This necessitates teachers effectively coordinating class time, not only arranging for the teaching of writing introductions but also reinforcing through exercises and peer evaluations to enhance students' exam preparation skills.

In this experiment, students were assigned to continue writing in four different styles; however, it did not specifically examine whether the design of multiple scaffolds influenced the collaborative effect and language production output of each style. This should be the focus of future research endeavors.

3.3.2. Teaching Reflection

As cognitive scaffolding, continuation materials play a pivotal role in the continuation process. The selection of these materials must align with the learning situation, teaching objectives, and talent cultivation goals. If the materials are improperly selected, overly difficult, or inconsistent with the style being studied, students may rely on their existing, vague preconceptions rather than utilizing scientific observation and analysis to continue writing and construct new concepts. Therefore, for students in application-oriented universities, besides their individual cognitive differences, the appropriateness of the difficulty level of the continuation materials also impacts the effectiveness of continuation writing, as well as its promotional effect in the teaching of writing courses within these universities.

Through experiments, it was observed that the teaching effectiveness of the experimental class, where teachers actively participated in discussions and evaluations, particularly in guiding students in peer evaluations, surpassed that of the control class. This is attributed to teachers fully leveraging their scaffolding role as mentors throughout the writing process, providing timely and effective guidance at crucial stages. Of course, to optimize the outcomes of micro-evaluation, teachers need to employ multiple scaffolds. When facilitating teaching activities through “continuation writing”, they should strive to transform writing classes into interactive classrooms that inspire wisdom, enhance creativity, cultivate students’ habits of active learning, and foster autonomous learning abilities, thereby stimulating students’ learning potential.

4. Summary

“Continuation” stands as a pivotal factor in facilitating high-quality and efficient learning within second language acquisition theory. It is postulated that “language is learned through ‘continuation’, and efficient language learning is achieved through ‘continuation’, involving ‘creative imitation driven by meaning expression in rich contexts’, and ‘static learning, dynamic use’” (Wang, 2016, 2021). Guided by the “Introduction”, this paper implements “reading and writing continuation” in applied college English classrooms. By designing multiple scaffolds to assist in the “continuation” writing task, the accuracy and complexity of students’ writing language have shown improvement compared to the control group.

In the application of “continuation theory” in teaching practice, variations exist based on the learning effectiveness, tasks, interaction intensity, and learner proficiency associated with “reading and writing continuation”. The teaching design and application of “continuation writing” must consider cognitive and emotional factors to attain optimal learning effectiveness. If attention to specific language forms is not emphasized in continuation writing, it may sometimes prove challenging to achieve correct and effective coordination (Peng & Wang, 2025). Therefore, teachers can explore diverse reinforcement forms of “continuation works” based on “continuation writing” to enhance its learning effectiveness. In

addition to leveraging the learning effectiveness of “continuation works” in micro language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, teachers can also explore the role of “continuation works” in the formulation of testing and evaluation standards, academic foreign language ability cultivation, and classroom ideological and political education, thereby tapping into the potential educational and teaching application value of “continuation theory”.

With the ongoing enrichment of theoretical practice, reading and writing continuation will gradually gain popularity in China and may even be recognized as an effective method for learning foreign languages abroad. In the aforementioned related research, reading and writing continuation has been found beneficial for both English and Chinese learning. Although there is currently no research on reading and writing continuation for other foreign languages in China, with the continuous refinement and promotion of this theory, reading and writing continuation is poised to be applied on a larger scale, enhancing the foreign language application abilities of a diverse range of learners.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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