

The Construction of Multiple Instructional Scaffolds in College English Writing Teaching Based on Continuation Theory*

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Abstract—The improvement of college students' writing ability has proved the effect of the “continuation theory” and the continuation tasks by Professor Wang Chuming and his team through a large number of empirical studies. Based on their research, this thesis attempts to explore the construction of multiple instructional scaffolds under the guidance of the “continuation theory” in the applied college. According to students' current situation, the reasonable use of multiple instructional scaffolds could heighten the effect of the continuation task on second language learners' written accuracy, complexity, and effectively improve their English writing ability.

Keywords—scaffolding instruction; multiple instructional scaffolds; continuation task

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the "National Standards for Undergraduate Teaching Quality of English Majors in Colleges and Universities" (hereinafter referred to as "national standard"), language ability is the primary ability to construct a core literacy framework for students. It not only refers to traditional basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, but also includes the ability to appreciate texts, such as the appreciation of rhetorical and other artistic techniques, the proper interpretation of the culture, value, etc. behind the language; to explore and create the beauty behind the language, such as the ability to write according to requirements, to show the artistic beauty and ideological beauty of language accurately. From such a standard, it can be seen clearly the importance of improving students' writing ability.

II. “CONTINUATION THEORY” AND SCAFFOLDING TEACHING

The “continuation theory” was proposed by Professor Wang Chuming, who believes that language could be learned by "continuation" [1]. He began to apply this theory and encourage students to do continuation tasks. Through

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experiments, Professor Wang found that it is also available in L2 writing training. This method is called the “continuation theory” (Wang, 2012). The essence of "continuation" is to fully understand the previous part of the article and to produce supplementary content that conforms to the previous language rules, structure and expressions.

The scaffolding teaching mode is one of the constructivist teaching modes. It means that teachers provide a temporary support for students in the teaching process to help them develop their own learning ability. This model is proposed to help learners complete tasks that they cannot independently accomplish through an interactive form of effective teacher-student dialogue.

In short, the two approaches — the “discourse model” between the learner and the text, and the “discourse model” between the teacher and learners achieve equally satisfactory results. Recent years, many scholars have done a lot of research on the “continuation theory” and scaffolding teaching. Jianglin (2016) discusses the effects of the continuation task on L2 vocabulary learning; Zhang Xiuqin (2017) investigates the differences in alignment and language error frequency produced in the continuation tasks of narration and argumentation, etc. At present, it seems that there is limited research on both the “continuation theory” and the multiple instructional scaffolds; therefore, this paper tries to establish the link and analyze it.

III. THE CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIPLE INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING

A. Teaching Objects and Curriculum Arrangements

The author's teaching objects are sophomores of English major in the applied college. There are 35 students in both the experimental class (Class A) and the control class (Class B). These two classes share similar passing rate and rate of excellency in the final exam last term. All the students have completed the basic English writing course, and they would have two periods of intermediate writing class per week this term. In order to ensure the validity of the experiment, the writing practice is arranged in class time. According to the teaching design, the author arranges the same teaching content about prewriting and a pre-test in both Class A &

Class B in the first six weeks. From Week 7 to the end of the term, Class A is asked to finish one continuation task per week, while Class B follows the conventional way to write on a topic. The pre-test and the post-test are of the same type — to write after reading (TEM-4 style).

B. Research Questions

Jianglin's research revealed that the continuation task generated more gains on accuracy and complexity than the topic writing task [2]. Therefore, compared with the conventional writing teaching, this study attempts to examine whether the application of the multiple instructional scaffolds based on the "continuation theory" would bring better learning effect to the applied college students who have comparatively frail foundation in studies.

C. Designing Multiple Instructional Scaffolds

1) Input stage before class — building cognitive scaffold: Students in Class A are asked to watch micro-classes, courseware, extracts from classical works uploaded by the teacher in advance, and consider the corresponding questions also left on line. With the help of the micro-classes, the basic concept has been transmitted to the students, which is beneficial to the study of the formal materials in class time. The design of the pre-class reading is based on the theme of this week, which helps students to accumulate vocabulary and help build a knowledge framework. In order to achieve the purpose of supervision, the teacher would ask students to send the reading feedback (accumulation of the difficult language expressions) to him or her.

The pre-class preparations for the students in Class B are the same, and think about the pre-work questions left on line. However, they don't have to do pre-class reading and give feedback.

2) In-class reading and discussion — building generic structure when students align with the input text in a continuation task: Due to the limited class time, the reading material in class time is relatively compressed (less than 400 words), and the end of the article is cut off for the students to read and finish continuation task. At this time, the concept input completed during the pre-class preparation has become a cognitive support, and the students will automatically recall the articles they read before the class. After in-class reading, students discuss the questions with group members in fifteen minutes raised by teachers. These questions relate to the content introduced in the micro-class on-line, such as the six elements of the story, the theme and the climax of the story, and the different language characteristics of the two stories. On the basis of resource sharing, discussion enables students to complete the construction of knowledge.

Students in Class B also have to answer questions from the teachers which cover the micro-class and coursewares to help them better understand the key points of this chapter. In the session of in-class reading, the students read the complete

article in the traditional way, and the teacher guides them to analyze the structure of the article, the content, central idea, language style etc. Their assignment is to write on the relative topic.

3) Teacher's Q&A and the session of in-class continuation task — building language expression scaffold: After the group discussion in the experimental class, the teacher gives instruction to the problems that students reflected the most, combined with the content of the pre-class reading, such as the discourse structure and cohesive means that were not involved in the previous reading. The students are guided into the situation through question and answer, and begin to explore independently. At this time, the teacher's emotional support role is reflected in the process of the inspiration, instruction, helping, and finally let the students analyze it themselves. On the basis of the input before class, in-class reading, group discussion and teacher's explanation, the students in Class A use the words, lexical chunks and syntactic structure accumulated from the reading materials to continue the writing to achieve the alignment. That is to say, the subjects were exposed to rich language materials twice before the writing task, and the content schema of related topics has been formed in their mind. Even the academically poor students, to some extent, could grasp valuable information from the material, and then reduce writing anxiety.

The students in Class B do not have continuation task in class. They are asked to finish a piece an essay on the relative topic to that of the same subject, same type to the students in Class A.

4) After-school feedback stage — building peer review scaffold: Bai Liru's study has proved that the feasibility and validity of peer revision in English writing process[3]. Therefore, in this study, finishing the continuation tasks, students in Class A are asked to have peer review — two of them is a group to evaluate each other's writing and give a comment. At first, students have obvious fears and fears because they don't know how to make judgement. They write single declarative sentence to their partners to say yes or no in English or even Chinese. Teacher gives encouragement at this time regardless of the language quality in their comments. In the following teacher review session, she gives objective comments to both the writer's work and the student reviewer's evaluation. Teacher's review and feedback are also function as scaffolds at this time. After three times of practice, half of the students have been able to imitate the teacher's comments to give a more objective evaluation to peers. The author believes that this is also a kind of alignment, or could be regarded as a kind of "continuation." When students can evaluate other people's articles, they will consciously reflect on their own continuation tasks and make self-evaluation.

During this empirical study, 10% of the students in Class A made revisions after peer evaluation. The second version was significantly better than the first one. Three percent of

them disagree with each other in mutual evaluation, and the teacher became the arbitrator.

There is no peer review session in Class B, the teacher gives comments to students directly and asks them to by themselves.

D. Research Results and Teaching Introspection

1) *Research results:* First, according to the instructional design, the post-test is carried out in the 16th week. The T-unit (Minimum Terminable Unit) is the assessment instrument to evaluate student's continuation tasks (Wang Cuitian, 1985), for it is the unit of measure of the stylistic and syntactic maturity [4]. Details as follows:

- ① The ratio of the number of T units without errors to the total number of T units (error-free T-units / T-units);
- ② The ratio of the total number of errors to the total number of T units (errors / T-units);
- ③ The ratio of the total number of clauses to the total number of T units (clauses / T-units);
- ④ The ratio of the total number of dependent clauses to the total number of clauses (dependent clauses / clause);
- ⑤ Number of T-units contained in an average of 100 words (100/T-units).

According to the pre-test results, for item ① (error-free T-units / T-units), the average value of Class B is 0.66, while Class A is 0.53; for item ② (errors / T-units), the average mean of Class B is 0.40, while Class A is 0.32. According to post-test results, for Item ① (error-free T-units /T-units), the average value in Class B is 0.85, while the number to Class A is 0.88; for Item ② (errors / T-units), the average mean of Class B is 0.17, while the number to Class A is 0.18. These two sets of data suggest that though Class B students made more mistakes, the language accuracy of two classes are significantly improved, which proves the teaching effect of applying "Continuation theory" in writing teaching.

According to the pre-test results, for Item ③ (Clauses/T-units), the average value of Class B is 0.23, while the number of Class A is 0.24; for Item ④ (Dependent clauses/clause), the average mean of Class B is 0.34, while the number of Class A is 0.32; for Item ⑤ (the average number of T-units among every 100 words), the average value of Class B is 7.06, while the number of Class A is 8.03. According to the post-test results, for Item ③ (Clauses/T-units), the average value of Class B is 0.43, while the number of Class A is 0.54; for Item ④ (Dependent clauses/clause), the average mean of Class B is 0.42, while the number of Class A is 0.67; for Item ⑤ (the average number of T-units among every 100 words), the average value of Class B is 9.32, while the number of Class A is 10.3. These three sets of data suggest that the students in both Class A and Class B all made progress from the aspect of language complexity. However, the students in Class A have significantly improved the

syntactic maturity with the help of multiple instructional scaffolds, especially the number of T-units in every 100 words exceeds to 10.3.

Second, during the empirical study, 11% of the students in Class A made independent revisions after peer review, and the second version were significantly better than the first one. On average, 3% of the students would have opposite ideas with each other in their mutual evaluation, and the teacher should arbitrate. In order to understand the feedback of the students in Class A, the final questionnaire focused on whether the multiple instructional scaffolds exert stimulating effects. The result shows that 95% of the students hold positive attitude. They believe teachers' instruction and peer review help them consolidate their learning.

2) *Teaching introspection:* First, as a cognitive scaffold, materials continuation tasks play a key role in the learning process. The selection of these materials should be made in accordance with students' situation and teaching objectives. If they are given something too difficult, they would not construct new concepts and finish the continuation tasks. Therefore, to some extent, for the students of applied universities, in addition to the differences in their cognitive abilities, the selection of materials determines their performance in continuation tasks and the effect of promotion in English writing teaching in applied colleges.

Second, compared with the situation in Class B, it is found that teachers' participation in class discussion and evaluation has helped students in Class A made more progress, because the teacher functioned as a scaffold giving instructions to them.

Third, the choice of continuation materials determines whether students could successfully fulfill the cognitive process, and whether these multiple instructional scaffolds could work together smoothly. However, on this occasion, teachers would have very heavy workload and require cooperation with other team members.

Fourth, it is founded from the analysis of the questionnaire that the continuation tasks has reduced their anxiety in writing, but at the same time, 6% of the students expressed their problem about how to start an essay. Therefore, teachers should give detailed instruction on introduction writing.

IV. CONCLUSION

This empirical study proves that the multiple instructional scaffolds could help the students in applied colleges achieve more in English writing learning, and meet the requirements about language accuracy and maturity. In a way, this study has established the link between the "continuation theory" and the multiple instructional scaffolds.

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