

Continuation Task--- a Practical Writing Study to Chinese College Learners

Feng Pan

Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China

panfeng1978@163.com

Abstract: Continuation task(abbreviated to CT in the following), is a new method of teaching EFL writing and aims to improve writing capability as well as overall English proficiency for college students. It is a task-based, experimental, and write-to-learn method for learning English, with special attention given to learners' imitation and creation. Continuation task maintains that writing proficiency can be improved through comprehensive input. This paper composes five parts, which are theoretical Basis of CT, framework of CT, principles for CT, Teaching components of CT and implementation of CT. Imitation and creation are essential for CT. The first problem facing to teacher is what should be imitated. That is to say, what should teacher provide to learners. On the one side, input information should be special for one or two language aspects. The selective paragraphs should not be too difficult to imitate and interesting and thought-provoking, so that it can inspire learners to display imagination. Besides, extracurricular reading is important expansion for learners. These reading materials broaden learners' horizon in mind, enlarge good words and phrases and strengthen awareness of syntax devices. The reading is noticed input.

Keywords: Continuation task, theoretical Basis, framework, principles, components and implementation, imitation and creation

1. INTRODUCTION OF CONTINUATION TASK

Continuation task (CT) combines reading with writing, builds creative use of language imitation and enables learners to use immediately what are newly learned (Wang, 2012). Continuation task, first proposed by Wang Chuming, is a new method of teaching EFL writing and aims to improve writing capability as well as overall English proficiency for college students. It is a task-based, experimental, and write-to-learn method for learning English, with special attention given to learners' imitation and creation. Continuation task maintains that writing proficiency can be improved through comprehensive input. In the following, theoretical basis, framework, principles, components and implementation of CT will be illustrated one by one in detail.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS OF CT

CT is based on the input theory, cognitive writing process and output theory, which will be explained briefly in the following.

The input hypothesis proposed by Krashen, is one of the most argumentative theory. It states that learners acquire languages when learners understand messages (input) in the target language that are just a little beyond their current level of acquired competence. If a learner is at level 'i', the input for him should be at level 'i+1'. According to this hypothesis, learners should comprehend language which also contains text structure beyond their current level to make progress from one stage of language acquisition to higher level. Comprehension derives not only from the context in which the language occurs but also from extra-linguistic information. At the beginning of the acquisition process, comprehension is supported by confining language to the 'here and now'; that is to say, by merely mentioning things and events that appear physically in the learner's environment.

The process of writing is also a learner's development of cognition. As Hayes' (1996) model of writing demonstrates, native language writing process consists of two main parts: the task environment and the individual. The task environment includes the social environment and the physical environment. The social environment is made up of the audience who read one's writing, and collaborators who participate in the writing process. The physical environment includes the current text written, which may influence the writer's future writing performance and the composing medium, such as handwriting or word processing. Working memory, motivation and affect, cognitive processes, and long-term memory are four factors of individual writing. Hayes modifies conception of working memory, which is developed by Baddeley (1986). Haye holds that working memory is composed of three components which are: phonological memory stores auditory and oral information, such as reports and lectures; the visual-spatial sketchpad stores visual or spatial information, such as written material; semantic memory stores conceptual information, which are comprehension and decoding auditory and visual information.

In 1985, Swain found that immersion students who did not get a large number of input could speak and write not as bad as expected. The good explanation for this phenomenon was output hypothesis. From her perspective, output means not only a production of language but also a process of study. This is feasible when it comes to second language acquisition. Swain maintains that output influences grammatical competence. It is a syntactic process rather a semantic one. Production makes learners care more about ways of expression, while syntactic analysis plays little role in the course of comprehension of material. Swain thinks learners need both comprehensible input and comprehensible output if they are fluent and precise in using target language.

3. FRAMEWORK OF CT

The point for CT in writing (task-based language teaching) is real world or target task. These are the hundred and one thing we do with language in everyday life, from writing a message to confirming a mailing package to exchanging personal information with a new acquaintance. In order to provide learners with more opportunities in the classroom, teacher should change these target tasks into pedagogical tasks. Such tasks can be placed on a continuum from rehearsal tasks to activation tasks.

A rehearsal task in CT bears a clear and obvious relationship to its corresponding target tasks counterpart. It is special and concrete task, which focuses on the language forms and contents and will be discussed in CT tasks. Rehearsal task in CT is a controlled practice: teacher will present an example to illustrate target language goals, inspire learners to lighten their imagination. Activation task in CT is an assignment arranged for learners to fulfill the CT tasks and it is a free practice. Learners will associate prepared material, which may be chosen in textbook or extracurricular with other learners to broaden thought horizon.

4. PRINCIPLES FOR CT TEACHING

Principle1: Scaffolding

During the course of CT practice, holistic “chunks” of language will be given to learners who often believe their current processing ability. These “chunks” of language should be analyzed and illustrated by teachers to make the scaffolding effectively rooted in learners’ comprehension. If the scaffolding is removed at proper time, the learning process will not be interrupted.

Principle2: Task Dependency

The task dependency principle requires that each task exploits and relates the one beforehand and is illustrated in the instructional sequence. In a sense, the sequence shows a pedagogical story, when learners are led step by step to the point where they can complete the pedagogical task in the sequence. Within the task dependency framework, other principles also play a role in operation, such as the receptive-to-productive principle.

Principle3: Recycling

An analytic approach to pedagogy holds that learning is not an all-or-nothing process, but a process from a misconception to conception, and is piecemeal and inherently unstable. And recycling principle regards learners will not finish task the first time they encounter. The task should be reintroduced to learners over a period of time. It requires learners should encounter target language items both in linguistic and experiential environment, and they will know how a particular item connects with other closely in the linguistic environment. They will also see how it functions in different environment.

Principle 4: Active Learning

Active learning means that learners learn best through performing task actively. They construct their own knowledge instead of having it transmitted to them by the teacher. Being

used in CT, active learning requires that special class time and opportunities should be given to learners to practice the language items which they will use in CT.

Principle 5: Integration

Learners should understand the relationship between linguistic form, communicative function and semantic meaning, which are useful for language acquisition. Previously, most approaches to language teaching taught linguistic elements separately, which were grammatical, lexical and phonological components. CT imitates language elements of the reading material, such as lexical devices, rhetorical and stylistic devices, ways of paragraph development, but does not exclude communicative function.

Principle 6: Reproduction to Creation

Teacher should encourage learners to move from reproductive to creative language use. Reproductive tasks are mainly done in class, where learners comprehend language items provided by the teacher in the textbook. These tasks are designed to provide learners with chances of getting familiar with syntax devices, ways of development and linear thinking, and to imitate these language items.

Principle 7: Reflection

Teacher should provide learners more opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing.

Cultivating a reflective learner is part of language study where the focus shifts from language content to learning processes. Strictly speaking, learning-how-to-learn does not have a more privileged place in one particular approach to pedagogy than in any other. Adding a reflective element to teaching can help learners see the rationale for the new approach.

5. COMPONENTS OF CT

Components of CT include goals, input data, learner cognitive procedures, teacher role, learner role and setting. This model is represented diagrammatically below, and each component will be illustrated to see its characteristics.

① Goals

The goal of CT is to imitate language and cultivate thinking. For language, lexical devices, syntax devices and ways of paragraph development are taken into consideration. They should be concrete, special and overt. For thinking, thinking pattern and critical thinking are deserved to heed. In English expression, linear thinking pattern is displayed, though it is influenced deeply by modern Chinese prose and critical thinking ability is another aspect for learners to develop.

② Input

Input refers to study and discussion of language and thinking, but also data that learners achieve when they are completing the tasks assigned by the teacher. On the other hand, data also include what the learners produce by themselves. In this thesis, learners are mainly introduced with textbook in spare time, which they will get familiar with in lecture, and related

material is also provided which can help them master special language and thinking. The material should be interesting so that the learners can be attracted and inspired to release their creativity and impulse to complete the CT. And the material should leave enough space for learners to develop imagination. The material should not be very difficult so that learners can read through and want to imitate and have a feeling of achievement. The material should not be too short for college students, and the words are about 500.

③ Learner's Cognitive Procedures

The procedures specify what learners will actually do with the input that forms the point of departure for the learning task.

Learner's cognition is potential and hidden. Teacher can understand by some research instruments. One way of analyzing procedures is in terms of their focus or goal. One widely cited way of characterizing procedural goals is whether they are basically concerned with skill getting or skill using (Rivers and Temperley, 1978). In skill getting, learners master phonological, lexical and grammatical forms through memorization and manipulation. In skill using, they apply these skills in writing course. We should not ignore that learners can learn by doing.

④ Learner Role

In CT practice, teacher gives outside stimuli and learner is not a passive recipient. When he takes part in the task, he is an inter-actor and negotiator who can not only take teacher's instruction but also produce his own thought. The learner experiences a process of personal growth.

The learner is not isolated from other class members, and he is also involved in a social activity. He chooses appropriate setting when he finishes a task. Social activities may be pair work and group work. Even if teacher or other members present their works, learner is also active. Social and interpersonal roles of the learner cannot be divided from psychological learning processes. The learners should be responsible for their own learning and develop autonomy and strategy of learning-how-to-learn.

In CT practice, learners are executors of tasks. They are reflective about input information either coming from teacher's introduction or given text. They are cultivated to develop critical thinking through group work or teacher direction.

⑤ Teacher Role

Teacher role and learner role are two sides of a coin. When the learners adopt a more active role in the classroom, the teacher needs to adopt a different role.

The following diagram shows the various roles do not have to occur in the order shown. The actual sequence in which various roles are adopted will depend on the lesson plan, its objectives and processes.

In intensive reading course, teacher may act as someone who should provide explicit instruction and model of the target language. In CT, teacher acts as a facilitator and instructor.

⑥ Setting

Setting refers to the classroom arrangement applied in the task. It also requires consideration to what extent the task is to be carried out outside the classroom. In CT practice teacher ought to arrange various kinds of setting on the basis of different language items. There is wide range of configuration in the communicative classroom. Of course, the practical consideration such as class size should also be taken into consideration. The following diagram from Wright (1987a: 58) demonstrates different ways in which learners might be grouped physically within the classroom.

6. IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTINUATION TASK

According to steps of CT, the implementation of CT can be divided into 5 steps, which can be illustrated by the following sketch map (T for teacher and L for learners):

preparation (T) → presentation (T) → intake (L) → text production (L) → expansion (T)

① Preparation (T)

As a whole, task's dependence and recycling are embodied in this step. One task exploits and builds on the one that has gone before, so the learners are led step by step to the point where teacher aims through their implementation of the pedagogical task in the sequence. Learners can not achieve one teaching aim at one time, and task design should consider difficulties and reintroduction to that item over a period of time. It includes task preparation and setting preparation.

a. Task preparation

Teacher selects particular paragraphs of College English textbook which contain special language and related thinking as teaching aims. Except the difficulties in selecting material, learners' language attitude, motivation, language learning strategies and cognitive and affective factors should also be considered. Teacher can find them according to some methods, such as questionnaire, interview and classroom observation.

b. Setting preparation

Individual/pair/group settings are social environment and available for learners to form. Teacher provides proper settings according to the task types and class and individuals may be main setting forms.

② Presentation (T)

In order to create a good physical environment and give the learners necessary scaffolding, teacher exposes teaching aim clearly and explains by using specific examples to make learners learn best through doing actively. Teacher presents not only at the level of words, syntax and paragraph, but also the thinking patterns hidden between the lines of the textbook. The teacher just gives direction but not details.

③ Intake (L)

Based on the teacher's interpretation, peers' discussion and one's reflection, learner takes a cognitive process of learning. The process is hidden but observable. Learner's factors play an important role in this step.

④ Text production (L)

According to the information provided by teacher and peers, learners will complete a task whose beginning of composition is given.

⑤ Expansion (T)

The good works of learners' will be praised publicly. And tasks of words choice, syntactic schemes and creative ideas will be completed according to textbook. Some tasks will be practiced more than one time to make learners understand and master them. Skillfully. Teacher makes one task depending on another so that the tasks can form a stable chain.

7. CONCLUSION

Imitation and creation are essential for CT. The first problem facing to teacher is what should be imitated. That is to say, what should teacher provide to learners. On the one side, input information should be special for one or two language aspects. The selective paragraphs should not be too difficult to imitate, which are comprehended input and the base for CT. So learners should be familiar with the paragraphs of the textbook, sometimes even recitation is necessary. On the other side, the input information should be interesting and thought-provoking, so that it can inspire learners to display imagination. Besides, extracurricular reading is important expansion for learners. These reading materials broaden learners' horizon in mind, enlarge good words and phrases and strengthen awareness of syntax devices. The reading is noticed input. So the material may be a little difficult for some learners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pan Feng (1978--), male, teacher of College of Foreign Languages, Changchun University of Science and Technology, Master's Degree, research direction is applied linguistics).

REFERENCES

- [1] Atkinson, D.T. Nishino, E. Churchill &H. Okada. 2007. Alignment and Interaction in a Socio-cognitive Approach to Second Language Acquisition [J]. *The Modern Language Journal* 2007 971: 169-188
- [2] Dana.R.Ferris Writing In a Second Language [M] Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press 2013
- [3].Ellia, R. *The Study Second Language Acquisition* [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994

- [4] Gardner, R. 1985. *Social Psychology and Second language Learning : the Role of attitudes and Motivation* [M]. London: Arnold.2000
- [5] H.G Widdowson *Discourse Analysis* [M] Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press 2012
- [6] Krashen S D. *Writing: Research. Theory and Application* [M] Oxford and New York: Pergamon, 1984
- [7] Ken Hyland *Teaching and Researching* [M] Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press 2005
- [8] Ruth Wajnryb *classroom Observation Task* [M] Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press 2011
- [9]. Bai Liru. *The Formation of the Peer Assessment Feedback Model in College English Writing* [J]. *Modern Foreign Language of Guangzhou*, 2012(2).
- [10]. Cheng Xiaotang.*The Discourse Analysis of English Teacher in the Classroom* [M]. Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Lanuage Education Press, 2009.
- [11].Han Gang. *On the Construction of Subject Teaching Knowledge of English Teachers* [M]. Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Lanuage Education Press, 2011.
- [12].Jia Guanjie. *Basic Theory of English Teaching* [M]. Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Lanuage Education Press, 2011.
- [13].Ji Kangli. *The Influence of Native Language on English Writing: a Study of Learners' Attitudes* [J]. *Chinese Applied Linguistics*, 2011(1).
- [14]. Li Hai,Zhang Shujing. *The Trend of Chinese English Learners' Mental and Linguistic Attributes of Vocabulary Development -- a Study Based on WECCL and MRC Database* [J]. *Modern Foreign Language*, 2013(2).
- [15]. Li Shaoshan, Cai Jinting. *A New Breakthrough in the Theory of English Writing Assessment*[M] Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Lanuage Education Press, 2012.
- [16]. Liang Maocheng,Li Wenzhong,Xu Jiajin. *Corpus Application Course* [M]. Foreign Language And Research Press, 2010.
- [17]. Liang Xi. *Cultural Transfer in Chinese Students' English Composition* [D]. Southwestern University, 2002.
- [18]. Liu Yanchun. *The Application of Explicit Instruction in English Writing Class* [J].*Educational Exploration in Heilongjiang*, 2011.
- [19]. Ma Rong, Qin Xiaoqing. *Trends in the Study of Second Language Writing Fluency* [J]. *Modern Foreign Language*, 2014(2).
- [20]. Ni Qingshuang. *Constructing the Teaching Mode of College English Writing Teaching Based on Constructivism Learning Theory* [J]. *English Studies*, 2009.
- [21]. Wang Chuming. *A Study of the Interrelationship Between L2 Learning Variables and L2 Use* [J]. *Foreign Language in China*, 2009(5): 53-59.
- [22]. Wang Chuming. *Interaction and Cooperation and Foreign Language Teaching* [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2010(7).

- [23]. Wang Chuming. The Three Major Plots of Foreign Language Teaching and the Effective Way of Language Learning [J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2011.
- [24]. Wang Chuming. Continuation Task-- an Effective Way to Improve the Efficiency of Foreign Language Learning [J]. Foreign Language World, 2012.
- [25]. Wang Chuming. Writing to Learn: an Experiment on the Teaching Reform of English Writing [J]. Foreign Language And Research Press 2000.(3) 208-209.
- [26]. Wang Linhai,Sun Ning. The Influence of Teachers' Comments on the Types of Students' Composition Revision [J]. Foreign Language World, 2007(5).
- [27]. Wen Qiufang. Research Methods of Applied Linguistics and Thesis Writing [M]. Foreign Language and Research Press, 2011.
- [28]. Wu Jin,Zhang Zaixin. On the New Exploration of the Teaching of English Writing -- on the Feasibility before the Pre Writing Stage [J]. Foreign Language And Research Press, 2000(3): 213-218.
- [29]. Xu Fang.Teaching and Researching English Writing[M].Beijing:Foreign Language And Research Press, 2012.
- [30]. Yin Jingshu. College English Writing and Empathy Experience [J]. Journal of Zhejiang Ocean University, humanities and Sciences, 2005, (93) 75-79.