

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the role of input in teaching of continuation writing task : A case study for senior high school English teacher

Xu Dong^{1,*}, Nur Ainil Sulaiman¹, Wahiza Wahi², Siti Shuhaida Shukor³

¹ Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

² School of Liberal Studies (Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

³ Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

* Corresponding author: Xu Dong, p115524@siswa.ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates how senior high school English teachers in China plan and prepare input materials for the Continuation Writing Task (CWT), a component of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao). Through semi-structured interviews and document analysis with three teachers, the research identifies four interconnected themes. Findings reveal that teachers' reading material selection for students CWT writing is strategically focused on aligning with exam trends, ensuring thematic relevance, controlling difficulty, and stimulating student interest, primarily using narrative genres. However, they face significant challenges, including a scarcity of high-quality texts, difficulty mismatches, cultural accessibility issues, and balancing exam preparation with classroom engagement. In response, teachers employ adaptive strategies such as diversifying resources (e.g., textbooks, online materials, past papers), implementing tiered adaptations for proficiency levels, and building cultural bridges. The study concludes that effective CWT preparation requires teachers to act as critical curators, navigating the tension between standardized exam demands and the need to foster student engagement and writing proficiency.

Keywords: Adaptability; Emotional Intelligence; Performance; Team Dynamics; Team Reflexibility

1. Introduction

In China, English is defined as one of the three major courses since primary school to senior school, the other two major courses are Chinese and Mathematics. For Chinese students, the most important watershed in their educational life is the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), also known as Gaokao in China. NCEE in China is usually arranged on the 7-8th of June each year. Those who finish the three years senior high education can attend the NCEE. The National Matriculation English Test (NMET) is given 2 hours for the applicants. For NMET in NCEE, the test paper should meet the requirements of the academic quality levels that high school students should achieve. In 2017, the "New Curriculum Standards for General High School English (2020 Edition)" promulgated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China clearly stipulated three academic quality levels that high school students should achieve in English learning and defined the students in each level of academic quality. Academic quality is the student's

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academic achievement after completing the course of study. Academic quality standards are the main dimensions of the core literacy and performance level of the subject, combined with the curriculum content, the overall description of students' academic achievement. According to the key characteristics of academic achievement performance at different levels, academic quality standards clearly divide academic quality into three different levels and describe the concrete embodiment of learning outcomes at different levels. Each level is characterized by the key features of students' use of knowledge, skills, and a variety of important concepts, methods, and concepts to solve problems in situations of varying complexity.

This study is grounded in a set of complementary theories from second language acquisition and writing research that collectively explain how instructional input shapes learners' performance in continuation writing tasks. Specifically, the framework integrates Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Swain's Output Hypothesis, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, and Genre-Based Writing Theory. Together, these perspectives elucidate the mechanisms through which input is selected, mediated, processed, and transformed into written output within the context of senior high school English classrooms. Sociocultural Theory serves as the overarching lens for this study by emphasizing that learning is a socially mediated process. Language development occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others and through engagement with cultural artifacts such as texts and tasks. In continuation writing instruction, the initial reading passage, teacher explanations, model texts, and peer interaction function as mediational tools that scaffold students' learning within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The senior high school English teacher plays a crucial role in orchestrating these mediational processes by designing tasks, guiding text analysis, and providing feedback. From this perspective, input is not merely linguistic exposure but a socially situated resource that supports learners' gradual internalization of language forms and writing conventions. Krashen's Input Hypothesis provides a foundational explanation for the importance of comprehensible input in language learning. According to this hypothesis, learners acquire language when they are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency ($i+1$). In continuation writing tasks, the source text and related instructional materials supply learners with rich linguistic input, including vocabulary, grammatical structures, and discourse patterns. When such input is appropriately graded and meaningful, it enhances learners' comprehension and expands their linguistic repertoire, thereby creating favorable conditions for subsequent written production.

While input is essential, Swain's Output Hypothesis highlights the indispensable role of language production in development. Continuation writing tasks require students to actively transform input into output by extending or completing a given text. This process pushes learners to test hypotheses about language use and to confront gaps in their linguistic knowledge. Through attempting to express meaning in writing, learners are encouraged to draw more consciously on the input they have received, which promotes deeper processing and more durable learning. Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis further clarifies the cognitive mechanism linking input and acquisition. The hypothesis posits that learners must consciously notice specific language features in the input for learning to occur. In continuation writing instruction, teachers often direct students' attention to salient features of the source text, such as narrative structure, cohesive devices, lexical choices, and syntactic patterns. Such instructional focus increases the likelihood that learners will notice these features and subsequently incorporate them into their own writing. Genre-Based Writing Theory complements the above perspectives by emphasizing that writing is shaped by socially recognized text types and conventions. The input text in continuation writing functions as a genre model that demonstrates typical organizational patterns, rhetorical purposes, and stylistic features. Through guided analysis and imitation of these models, students develop an understanding of how effective texts are constructed and how meaning is organized at the discourse level. This theoretical perspective highlights that

input supports not only linguistic accuracy but also textual coherence and communicative effectiveness. Taken together, these theories suggest that instructional input, when mediated by teacher scaffolding and actively processed by learners through noticing and output, contributes to the development of students' continuation writing performance. In this study, input is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing textual materials, instructional explanations, and interactional support. These forms of input influence learners' cognitive engagement and writing practices, which in turn shape the quality of their written continuations in terms of accuracy, fluency, coherence, and creativity. This integrated theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for exploring how a senior high school English teacher utilizes input in teaching continuation writing tasks and how such practices affect students' writing development.

In recent years, with the advancement of the new NCEE reform, the English Curriculum Standards for Ordinary High Schools 2020 edition, have been revised (hereinafter referred to as the "NCS") puts forward the comprehensive use of listening, speaking, reading, watching, writing and other skills, emphasizing that the development of understanding skills and expressive skills should complement each other and promote each other^[1]. Writing, as an important expressive skill, is an important part of language application ability, and is often combined with other skills, such as reading and writing. This combination of reading and writing enables learners to develop language skills in comprehensive language practice activities and promote authentic language communication^[1]. According to the New Curriculum Standard (NCS), Level 1 is the main standard to judge whether the students attain the requirement of the graduation. Level 2 is the key element for NCEE. Level 3 can be used as a basis for other relevant exams or assessments^[1]. This means as a part of NMET, CWT should also meet the Level 2 requirements (See Appendix A).

In the history of teaching English Language writing, especially second and foreign language writing, is littered with giant swings of the methods pen dulum from, on one side, overtly teaching grammar as the basis for composition class with the underlying principle that this will be automatically transferred to the students' writing, to, on the other side, not teaching grammar at all during the writing class. These two different approaches have been called product approach and the process approach. The product approach reflects the student's competence as a writer and the process approach reflects the student's own writing behavior, purpose of writing and the consideration the audience. But no models for them to follow comparing with the product approach^[2].

Writing plays an important role in English learning of high school students in China. However, in the context of English writing instruction in China, where access to authentic English input is limited, a persistent issue has been the imbalance between input and output^[3]. Therefore, to help improve the current situation of English writing teaching in senior high schools, the writing teaching method of CWT which combining reading and writing, advocated its application in foreign language teaching^[4].

Continuation Writing firstly be used as a task int the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) in Zhejiang Province in China in 2016, Since then, Continuation Writing Task gradually used in NCEE for each province. Before 2016, the original NMET in NCEE was total 150 marks. Writing Part (35 marks) which had an Error Correction (10 marks) and a composition (25 marks). Since 2016, The NMET in New NCEE is still 150 marks. But the Writing Part (40 marks) which had practical writing (15 marks) and a CWT (25 marks). The most obvious change in the new English NCEE reform is that it breaks the traditional writing test. While retaining practical writing as the first part of writing, it adds two writing modes of CWT and summary writing as the second part of writing, and the two modes will replace each other from time to time. In the New NCEE for English subject, A passage of about 350 words of language material is provided in the composition part. Students are required

to continue writing reasonably according to the content of the given material and the opening words of the given paragraphs and develop it into a short passage with logical connection, plot and structure.

Continuation Writing Task (CWT) requires students to have certain reading ability. Based on understanding the original story, based on the opening words of the paragraph, combined with the context and logic of the original text, reasonable imagination is developed to construct the plot. It is a semi-open writing, which closely combines reading and writing and puts forward higher requirements for students' comprehensive language application ability. CWT puts forward higher requirements for students' comprehensive language application ability, which also means that senior high school English teaching has entered an era of "focus on reading, improve on output and emphasis on thinking". The introduction of the continuation task as a new component in China's college entrance exam reform, it has become a focal point in high school English teaching^[5]. Many experts have conducted research on this task, proposing not only specific teaching strategies but also advocating for its integration into daily classroom instruction. This approach is considered an effective means of improving high school students' English performance.

Students' ability to CWT is mainly tested in four aspects: "First, the ability to grasp the key information and language features of the passage; Second, the accuracy and richness of language use; The third is the ability to control the structure of discourse, and the fourth is the ability to think creatively"^[6]. It combines reading and writing skillfully to achieve a close relationship between language input and output, and tests students' language application ability more deeply. It requires students to improve their language ability and pay attention to the improvement of thinking quality, to effectively realize the purpose of promoting learning through examination.

By following this, the author sorted out the gaps of input in the current CWT studies, which laid the research foundation for the research direction of this paper.

First, in terms of the selection of input materials, many relevant studies take story reading materials as input materials and affirm that the task of continuation story writing has the effect of promoting learning. CWT requires a knowledge transforming process, as the test-takers should pay attention to both conceptual and textual aspects of the source text, this means source text need to be explored in CWT^[7]. However, in CWT, the provided reading materials require intensive reading and the skills to analysis the material, and scholars did not specify how the process the provided materials been intensive reading and teaching.

Secondly, in terms of input material patterns, the effects of CWT VS audio-visual writing on lexical, phrase and sentence coordination was explored^[8]. Virtual reality (VR) technology to build a "digital +" CWT reinforcement mode, it is interesting that both adopt the form of video, but the former believes that the degree of collaboration in reading and writing is stronger than audio-visual writing^[9]. However, the latter believes that the number of cycles, the length of continuations and the amount of alignment of different isomorphic in VR "digital +" are significantly more, and the amount of alignment of complex constructions is significantly more. Three input modalities: text modality, text+picture modality and text+video modality. Results showed that 1) text+video modality brought about stronger alignment at both linguistic and situational levels, more accurate and cohesive writing production; 2) text+picture modality only magnified alignment at situation models^[10]. This shows that the differences in the input materials patterns in CWT need to be further studied and demonstrated.

At last, in analysis of the processing of input materials, the impact of input reinforcement on the alignment effects in CWT^[11]. The results showed that input reinforcement increased learners' attention to language forms, amplified language-level alignment effects, effectively improved language accuracy, but did not significantly enhance the complexity and fluency of learners' language output. The study has not

confirmed whether input reinforcement is applicable to reading texts of multiple genres. The influence of topic familiarity on Chinese English learners' CWT. They examined the role of topic familiarity in alignment effects in writing output and CWT language performance (including complexity, accuracy, fluency). The results revealed that: 1) Alignment effects triggered by familiar topics are stronger; 2) Syntax complexity and accuracy are higher in writing on familiar topics, while vocabulary complexity is higher in writing on unfamiliar topics^[12]. However, the impact of topic familiarity on fluency is not significant. Familiar topics stimulate stronger interaction between learners and the text, while unfamiliar topics encourage learners to acquire richer vocabulary. This indicates that the quality of students' CWT is influenced by the familiarity of the topic. It is important to explore the EFL writing pedagogy suitable for young learners how story continuation (with or without reading input) under different topic familiarity conditions serves as a viable pedagogical means for secondary school students^[13]. CWT in three different genres: narrative, expository, and argumentative^[14]. They compared the alignment degree and writing quality of the learners' responses to the original texts in different tasks. The results showed that learners demonstrated interactive alignment with the original texts in all three tasks, and the writing quality exhibited strong consistency. The research provides empirical evidence for expanding CWT to more genres and offers new evidence for further clarifying task concepts. However, the study has limitations: firstly, it mainly used quantitative data analysis of alignment effects and writing quality, lacking qualitative research methods (such as think-aloud, retrospective interviews, etc.) to analyze learners' thinking processes in completing different genre writing tasks. Secondly, the research only examined vocabulary-level alignment, lacking alignment at the syntactic, rhetorical, and other levels.

To sum up, this study will focus on the the gaps in terms of input:

- (1) How the input materials prepared by teachers?
- (2) What challenges and strategies teachers may have when preparing the input materials in CWT teaching?

2. Methodology

This study used qualitative research as the research design. Qualitative methods rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse designs^[15]. Case study is employed for case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context^[16]. By following the figure, the first thing is to maintain the subject of the case study^[17]. The subject of the case study in this research is a local knowledge case for it starts with some special knowledge (CWT), noticing something interesting or unusual (challenges), putting two and two together and, with a spark of curiosity, a research project is fired and ready to fly.

The qualitative data in this study are analyzed using a theoretically driven and inductively refined coding scheme that captures how instructional input is selected, mediated, processed, and transformed into students' continuation writing. First, codes are applied to identify the characteristics of input, including the types of texts used (such as narrative source texts, model continuations, supplementary readings, and multimedia materials), their level of difficulty in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and concepts, as well as their richness and authenticity. Second, teacher mediation of input is coded to examine how the teacher selects, adapts, and scaffolds these materials through explicit instruction of vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure, and genre features, as well as through strategies such as guided questioning, modeling, and the use of sentence frames or graphic organizers. Third, learner engagement with input is coded at cognitive, behavioral,

and affective levels, focusing on how students notice language features, make inferences, connect new information to prior knowledge, annotate texts, participate in discussions, and express interest, confidence, or anxiety. Fourth, codes capture the ways in which learners transform input into output, including lexical borrowing or paraphrasing, imitation or adaptation of sentence patterns, transfer of discourse organization, and creative extension of ideas. Finally, writing performance outcomes are coded in terms of linguistic accuracy, fluency, coherence, cohesion, and overall quality, while contextual factors such as classroom conditions, teacher beliefs, and student characteristics are also considered. Together, these interrelated coding categories provide a systematic framework for interpreting how input functions in continuation writing instruction and how it contributes to students' writing development within the case study context.

When considering the school, the convenience sampling was used due to some practical considerations. Less desirable, but often used, is a nonprobability sample (or convenience sample), in which respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability^[18]. When choosing the convenience sampling, choosing the most accessible participants to participate in the study^[19]. The participant in this section was the senior high school in Hainan, China. By considering so many teachers in the school, the purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested^[20]. In purposive sampling, often (but by no means exclusively) a feature of qualitative research, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristic(s) being sought. They assembled the sample to meet their specific needs^[21]. Permission letter from the school is needed and the purpose of the study is told to the school leader. The criteria of the selected teacher needed one types of teachers in different grades (See **Table 1**). By providing the characteristics of the study sample to the school. Two types of teachers were needed. Type1, the novice teacher, is for those who have come and taught in the school within 2 years. Type2, the experienced teachers, is for those who have come to the school and taught for over 10 years. Each type will need three teachers. A name list will be provided by the school leader.

Table 1. Educational background and the teaching experience of the research participants.

	Cai	Lin	Mo
Teaching Years	3	2	19
Teaching Grade	1	2	3
Educational Degree	Master	Master	Master
Professional Title	Primary	Primary	Senior
School Area	Urban	Urban	Rural

Total 3 participants were interviewed in this research, all of them are senior high school English teachers. 2 of them whose teaching experience was below 5 years. 1 of them whose teaching experience was below 20 years. The teachers who hold teaching experience below 20 years both had the senior professional title. Her working place was in senior high school, and the school area was in rural, and the school level was public. The teachers who hold teaching experience below 5 years had the primary professional title whose working place was in senior high school, the school area were in urban, and the school level was public.

Prior to the start of the research, the applicable Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee reviews and approves the ethical considerations. This monitoring group ensures that the research complies with ethical standards and norms. The rights of participants are safeguarded during the IRB approval process, which carefully evaluates the research design and informed consent protocols. This study has already get the ethical review approval form from the H University with permission number WGY 202508.

Triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Triangulation is a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity^[22]. To enhance the validity and depth of the findings, this study employed methodological triangulation by collecting data from three distinct sources: semi-structured interviews with 3 participants, an analysis of teaching plans and teaching guided paper. The convergence of these different data sources allowed for a cross-verification of evidence; for instance, themes identified in the interviews were consistently observed in classroom observation video recording and corroborated by documentation analysis. This multi-faceted approach helped to mitigate the limitations inherent in any single method and provided a more nuanced, robust, and well-substantiated account of the challenges under investigation.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, a member checking procedure was conducted^[23]. “Once one’s findings have been taken back to the subject being studied, it can be verified and argued where one can be more confident of their validity”^[24]. This method is important as it prevented the researcher from making incorrect interpretations of what had been recorded by the participants. The participants verified the original Chinese transcripts and English translation transcripts by signing the name at the end of the transcript for proof. In this study. A purposive sample of 1 participant was selected to represent a range of experiences from the study. The participant was emailed with the interview sessions and the transcriptions. The participants expressed her agreement with the interview transcriptions.

3. Findings

The findings of this case study indicate that input plays a central role in the effective teaching of continuation writing tasks in senior high school English classrooms. The teacher’s deliberate selection and use of reading input provided essential scaffolding for students’ writing, particularly in helping them maintain textual coherence, logical plot development, and thematic consistency with the original text. Through exposure to well-structured input, students were better able to infer narrative direction and produce continuations that aligned with the source text in terms of content, tone, and register. This suggests that high-quality input serves as a foundation for meaningful written output in continuation writing tasks.

In addition, the linguistic features embedded in the input text significantly supported students’ lexical and syntactic development. Students frequently drew on vocabulary, collocations, and sentence structures from the original text when composing their continuations, which contributed to improved language accuracy and increased syntactic complexity. The teacher’s explicit guidance in directing students’ attention to key linguistic patterns further enhanced this process, enabling students to transform input into usable language resources. These findings demonstrate that input not only provides ideas for content but also functions as a linguistic model that facilitates more proficient language production.

Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of teacher mediation in maximizing the effectiveness of input. Rather than allowing students to engage with the input text independently, the teacher actively guided textual analysis by emphasizing narrative clues, character development, and implicit meanings. This instructional mediation helped students move beyond mechanical imitation toward more purposeful and contextually appropriate writing. As a result, students’ continuation texts reflected a deeper understanding of the original passage and exhibited greater pragmatic and stylistic alignment, indicating that input becomes effective intake through guided instructional support.

The findings also reveal that sustained exposure to input enhanced students’ genre awareness and writing strategies specific to continuation writing tasks. Over time, students demonstrated increased

sensitivity to narrative conventions such as tense consistency, point of view, and resolution patterns, as well as improved strategic behaviors including planning, monitoring coherence, and revising for consistency with the source text. However, challenges were observed among lower-proficiency students, who tended to rely heavily on direct copying from the input due to limited vocabulary and weaker inferencing abilities. This underscores the need for differentiated scaffolding to ensure equitable access to the benefits of input. Overall, the study finds that appropriate and well-mediated input not only improves students' writing quality but also enhances their engagement and confidence, making continuation writing a more accessible and motivating task for senior high school English learners.

The researcher adopted a pseudonym to represent each participant in order to maintain the individuals' confidentiality. Each presentation of the study's findings was accompanied with excerpts from interviews with teachers, observations of teachers teaching, and screenshots of the teaching plans and teaching guided paper. Examples of interview labels include (TM, IV/L39C58-L46C13, where "TM" refers to the study participant's name (Teacher Mo), "IV" refers to Teacher Mo's interview, and "L39C58-L46C13" refers to the content in the interview transcript which start from line 39 column 58 to line 46 column 13. The researcher then applied the label "TG" for the teaching guided paper, where label "TP" refers to the teaching plan.

This study found that material selection focus, CWT genre, problems with selection materials and material selection strategies are combined to understanding EFL teachers plan and prepare for the CWT lesson in senior high school.

3.1. Theme 1 Material selection focus

The material selection focus shows several aspects for EFL teachers when they prepare for the CWT materials. These aspects contain themes, exam relevance, materials difficulty, students' interest and inner elements of the selected materials. These aspects also show EFL teachers' various considerations when choosing the CWT materials.

"Another point is the theme. The theme is very important. Our theme is about human-nature, human-society, and human-animal. Generally speaking, we tend to choose the themes of human-nature and human-society more frequently. According to the college entrance examination in the past years, in the exams in Hainan, the themes of human-nature and human-society are more common. However, the theme of human-animal has not appeared yet. But it has appeared in Zhejiang. So now we are starting to pay attention to the theme of human-animal" (TM, IV/L39C58-L46C13).

"When selecting materials, our primary focus is on thematic orientation—we prioritize texts with positive themes that align with high school students' life experiences and cognitive levels to ensure relatability and emotional resonance" (TL, IV/L39C8-L41C80)

"Finally, all selections are carefully benchmarked against the evolving trends in Gaokao continuation writing prompts to ensure exam relevance" (TL, IVL46C0-L47C51).

"In terms of difficulty control, we follow a standard slightly above textbook content while maintaining close proximity to the reading level of authentic Gaokao exam passages" (TL, IVL41C38-L43C82).

“Difficulty: Moderately challenging to accommodate students at different proficiency levels” (TC, IVL31C0-L32C6)

“When it comes to choosing the input materials, the problem I encounter is always worrying that this child won’t be able to understand these materials” (TM, IVL53C8-L54C75).

Based on the above passages, the teachers emphasize aligning themes and difficulty with the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) to ensure exam relevance. They focus on choosing appropriate themes that connect with students’ life experiences and cognitive levels, while carefully correcting the difficulty of materials to fall between textbook content and actual exam passages. This strategy aims to challenge students effectively within their “zone of proximal development” and meet specific Gaokao assessment requirements.

Teacher Lin mentions sparking students’ interests is important for the materials selection. She also points out suspense or conflict elements in narrative text works to stimulate students’ curiosity about the reading materials. Teacher Mo further points out positive theme is certain but twists and turns in the materials need to be noticed based on the examination concepts. Teacher Mo also states materials selection also need to consider the text sequence, the text sequence which she preferred. Teacher Cai mentions positive value should be considered for the selected materials. She also mentions text content fluency and thematic of the text should be relevance when selecting the materials.

“Equally important is sparking students’ interest, so we choose texts with compelling narratives featuring elements like suspense or conflict to stimulate their curiosity” (TL, IVL44C7-L45C85).

“As for their interest, generally speaking, narrative essays usually don’t pay much attention to the twists and turns of the story. But according to the college entrance examination concept, it should focus on positive themes, that is, to pay attention to these” (TM, IVL48C15-L51C18).

“So, the narrative texts I usually choose are those presented in the normal chronological order” (TM, IVL62C15-L63C19).

“The content should convey positive values and proper guidance for students” (TC, IVL29C11-L30C0)

“When selecting these materials, I prioritize narrative fluency and thematic relevance” (TC, IVL67C74-L68C71).

3.2. Theme 2 CWT genre

The teachers’ discussion on the CWT genre focuses on its content and pedagogical utility. Teacher Cai establishes that the selected genre is narrative as a choice. Teacher Mo justifies by pointing to its consistent use in previous NCEE exams. Teacher Lin elaborates on the pedagogical benefits, explaining that narratives, with their well-developed plots, clear characters, and identifiable conflicts, provide ideal scaffolding for continuation practice. To add variety and prepare students for diverse tasks, Teacher Lin also recommends occasionally using narrative-argumentative hybrid texts. This hybrid approach, which blends storytelling with analytical perspective, helps students adapt to different writing styles and introduces a new dimension to CWT training.

“With a predominance of narrative texts” (TC, IVL24C4-L24C38)

“According to the requirements of CWT for the college entrance examination, it is all narrative essays. So I chose this material because it is a narrative essay” (TM, IVL26C13-L28C81).

“For text selection, we primarily use narrative passages with well-developed plots, clear characterizations, and identifiable conflicts as they provide ideal scaffolding for continuation practice, while occasionally incorporating narrative-argumentative hybrid texts that combine storytelling with perspective analysis to help students adapt to different writing styles commonly assessed in continuation tasks” (TL, IVL28C36-L33C19).

Teaching steps in the teaching guided paper for the materials reading also be observed, three teachers shows different arrangement in their teaching gudie paper. Teacher Cai states three contents of the steps while Teacher Lin and Teacher Cai both state two contents of the steps. The below excerpts support this.

“Step 1: Read for the basic information” (TC, TGL2C4-L2C38)

“Step 2: Read for the main idea and the theme” (TC, TGL8C4-L8C44)

“Step 3: Read for the plot” (TC, TGL13C4-L13C25)

“Step 1. Read for the basic information” (TL, TGL2C4-L2C39).

“Step 2 Read for the story plot” (TL, TGL15C5-L15C31).

“Step 1. Read for the basic information” (TM, TGL1C4-L1C38).

“Step 2 Read for the story plot” (TM, TGL7C4-L7C30).

The above passages show the content of the aid of genre focus on basic information of the selected genre text, main idea and theme, and the story plot of the selected genre text. These steps are also the focus points for the teachers for their selected genre text which will show to students.

3.3. Theme 3 Problems with selection materials

Based on the teachers’ analysis, material selection for CWT training faces two core problems. The first is a set of discourse problems: a mismatch where the thematic content may exceed students’ proficiency; a limitation in thematic coverage that fails to resonate with diverse student interests, leading to poor classroom engagement; a lack of thematic relevance and cultural accessibility, which hinders students’ grasp of emotional cues and plot logic, resulting in meaningless continuations; and an over-reliance on exam-style texts that, while initially useful, ultimately creates monotony and dampens creative writing enthusiasm. The second major issue is text quality. Teachers argue that many available materials are unsuitable because they either feature overly straightforward plots with limited space for creative continuation or use excessively complex language and vocabulary beyond the syllabus. This combination of an unstimulating plot and prohibitive language creates a dual burden, challenging both student comprehension and their ability to engage meaningfully in continuation writing, thereby complicating the teacher’ s task of finding appropriate, high-quality texts. The below passages shows these concerns:

“ When selecting input materials for continuation writing instruction, I encountered several practical issues. First, difficulty mismatch is a common

problem. While some texts have appropriate themes, they contain overly complex sentence structures or obscure vocabulary that exceed students' current proficiency levels, often causing confusion rather than sparking interest - particularly for intermediate learners. Secondly, thematic relevance and cultural accessibility pose significant challenges. Materials tied to specific cultural contexts (such as unfamiliar regional customs or historical events) may hinder students' ability to grasp subtle emotional cues or plot development logic, making it difficult for them to produce meaningful continuations. Third, achieving balance between exam alignment and student engagement proves problematic. Although using materials that mirror exam question types is essential, over-reliance on test-style texts can make lessons monotonous and dampen students' enthusiasm for creative writing" (TC, IVL35C6-L47C31).

"First, there exists a scarcity of high-quality texts - many available materials either present overly straightforward plots that offer limited space for creative continuation, making it difficult for students to expand their writing, or contain excessively complex language with too many advanced vocabulary and sentence structures beyond the syllabus, thereby increasing comprehension burdens. Second, there's a noticeable limitation in thematic coverage, making it particularly challenging to source materials that simultaneously resonate with students of diverse interest orientations, which consequently hampers the ability to engage all learners effectively in the classroom. This dual predicament of inadequate narrative potential in texts and narrow thematic range significantly constrains our capacity to facilitate comprehensive continuation writing practice" (TL, IVL51C81-L62C16).

3.4. Theme 4 Material selection strategies

To address material selection challenges, teachers employ strategies encompassing diversified sourcing, adaptive methods, and self-assessment. Diversified resources include teaching supplements (such as textbooks, exercise books, and stories-favored by Teachers Cai and Lin for their pedagogical value), internet-based materials (adapted by Teacher Mo to fill gaps in exam-aligned content), and exam-oriented resources (like past CWT and NCEE papers). Selection methods involve tailored adaptations: Teacher Cai uses a tiered approach to adjust difficulty, builds cultural cognitive bridges to enhance comprehension, and creates a hybrid material bank blending exam-focused and engaging content. Teacher Lin expands platforms to diversify sources and stimulate interest, while Teacher Mo focuses on word explanation and substitution to lower vocabulary barriers. Finally, self-assessment ensures approaches are comprehensive, pedagogically sound, and balanced-developing both exam skills and student engagement, while aligning with thematic and examination requirements.

"The content is mainly extracted from various exercise books, textbook passages, and short stories" (TC, IVL23C20-L24C38)

"Reading comprehension sections of past Gaokao exam papers" (TC, IVL22C42-L23C18)

"Materials that mirror exam question types is essential" (TC, IVL45C27-L45C82)

“First, to handle the problem of mismatched material difficulty, I adopted a tiered adaptation approach. Before class, I administer brief tests to assess students' vocabulary and grammar proficiency, then modify the texts accordingly. When encountering complex sentences or obscure vocabulary, I simplify or replace them with more common expressions while preserving the story's core content and emotional tone. For more advanced classes, I retain the original text but add annotations explaining cultural contexts or writing techniques. Second, to overcome comprehension barriers related to themes and cultural aspects, I focus on building cognitive bridges in advance. When materials involve specific cultural contexts, I use short videos, images, or classroom discussions to pre-teach relevant knowledge. For instance, when encountering Western holiday customs in texts, I spend about five minutes guiding students to compare them with familiar local festivals, helping them connect personal experiences with the text to deepen understanding. Finally, to balance exam-oriented needs with engaging content, I've created a hybrid material bank consisting of 60% exam-aligned articles and 40% more entertaining texts, including excerpts from young adult novels and short stories. When selecting these materials, I prioritize narrative fluency and thematic relevance. This approach allows students to practice exam-required skills while gradually developing their interest in narrative writing. This approach allows students to practice exam-required skills while gradually developing their interest in narrative writing” (TC, IVL51C0-L70C30).

“Authentic Gaokao English past papers that strictly conform to the examination syllabus requirements” (TL, IVL24C12-L25C33).

“High-quality teaching supplements like Five-Three (Wu-San) and Spark English's Continuation Writing for Senior High English: Gaokao Special Training - all featuring professionally developed exercises with proven pedagogical value” (TL, IVL25C39-L28C29).

“This balanced approach ensures comprehensive preparation by exposing learners to both the fundamental narrative structures and more complex integrated writing forms they may encounter in examinations” (TL, IVL33C20-L35C60).

“We should expand our material selection channels by regularly sourcing suitable content from diverse platforms such as the bilingual edition of China Daily, TED Talks, and classic young adult literature short stories. This diversified approach incorporating multiple themes and text formats will help cover a wider range of student interests” (TL, IVL64C4-L68C17).

“As for my selection of materials, currently, before the official inclusion of these materials in the college entrance examination, the previous ones were some small stories selected from the internet and then adapted by ourselves” (TM, IVL27C38-L30C47).

“Now, there are already such college entrance examination questions. The key point is that they are mainly based on those college entrance examination questions and some content from previous years' provinces are used to simulate college

entrance examinations. These are taken down as training materials" (TM, IVL30C49-L34C21).

"This comprehensive approach guarantees our materials are thematically appropriate, pedagogically sound, engaging, and examination-aligned" (TM, IVL47C61-L49C33).

"It's about explaining the meaning of words, and the other one is to substitute words" (TM, IVL67C4-L68C5).

According to the excerpts above, the material selection approach need focus on what the selected materials can bring to the students. Not only a basic CWT narrative structure but a preparation for complex integrated writing forms. Not only CWT skill learned but a real writing interest purpose. Not only an appropriate theme with pedagogical teaching but a exam aligned engaging activities. These are the materials selection benefits for both teachers and students.

4. Discussion

The following figure integrated all the elements and themes for research questions, shows the relationship between these elements and themes.

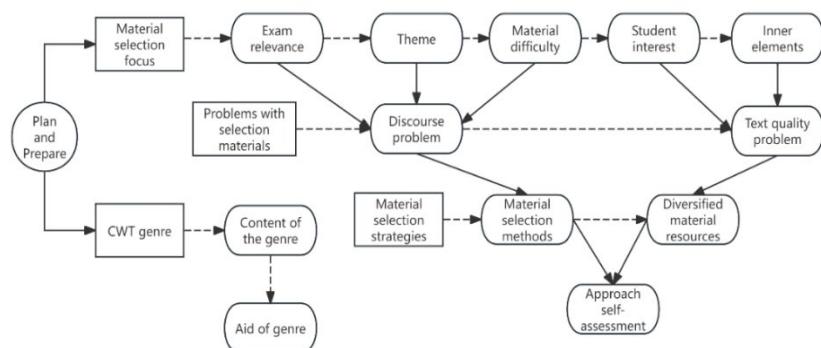


Figure 2. Relationship between themes and elements in plan and preparation in CWT.

According to the above figure, when teachers plan and prepare in the CWT writing, teachers need to consider the CWT genre whether narrative or a hybrid text for different purpose, a teaching guide paper needs designed as an aid to help students understand the basic information and the story plot. Meanwhile, Materials selection needs following keep exam relevance, appropriate themes, material difficult, students interests and inner elements considerations. The exam relevance, theme and material difficulty brings the discourse problem. Students' interest and Inner elements bring the text quality problem. To solve the problems, material selection strategies need to be carried out to solve the problem, material selection methods help solve the discourse problem and the diversified material resources help solve the text quality problem. In the end, teachers need to self-assess the strategies whether they work or not, this figure explains how teachers plan and prepare in the CWT writing in senior high school.

However, some issues are found when teachers plan and prepare in the CWT teaching. First, teachers choose the materials based on the exam relevance for the purpose of meeting the NCEE requirement, but the exam-based materials can make lessons monotonous and dampen students' enthusiasm for creative writing. How teachers maintain the text both meet the exam relevance and CWT lesson not monotonous with the exam-based materials.

The meaning of separate teaching and examination is teaching is free from the influence of NCEE. Sharing of ideas means daily training and the questions of NCEE follows the same concept of promoting learning. The concept of sharing represents a compromise and balance in addressing the separation of teaching and testing. While advocating for their separation, it emphasizes the importance of sharing. What is separated are the methods of teaching and testing, while what is shared is the view of language acquisition underlying the test construct, along with its corresponding learning and teaching strategies. Compared learning-oriented assessment and testing, summarizing the following characteristics of learning-oriented assessment: it primarily employs formative evaluation, with summative evaluation being its secondary function; testing, in contrast, has summative evaluation as its primary function and formative evaluation as secondary^[25]. Whether assessment is used for learning facilitation or for testing has a direct impact on its implementation. Two assessments of exam: one is assessment for learning (learning-oriented assessment); another is assessment of learning (testing).

As for CWT task, it both contains the assessment for learning and assessment of learning. For the exam relevance argues the CWT's assessment of learning. The class monotonous shows the students' engagement in CWT and therefore assessment for learning is required for students' feeling CWT learning is promoting and engagement is improved. The challenge of balancing exam relevance with classroom engagement stems from a false dichotomy between rigorous skill-building and creative expression. The solution is for teachers to reframe their roles from drill instructors to creative coaches who use the exam materials as a scaffold for innovation, not a cage. This can be achieved by first demystifying the exam format through collaborative analysis, allowing students to "crack the code" themselves. Then, exam prompts should be treated as creative springboards for brainstorming and genre-shifting, fostering ownership and flexibility. By integrating skill-building into gamified micro-tasks like situational drama performance, by simulating real-life language contexts, can effectively stimulate students' learning interest and facilitate their understanding and creative expression of the language through practical application, teachers can make the practice of essential techniques dynamic and low-stakes [26]. Ultimately, cultivating a workshop environment where peer review focuses on strengths and student work is celebrated shifts the classroom culture from one of monotonous repetition to one of motivated experimentation, ensuring that lessons meet the dual objectives of exam readiness and sustained student enthusiasm.

Besides, teachers suggest that the selection of the materials should be above textbook and below exam passage to maintain difficulty, whether the textbook and the teaching-supplement based materials have already challenged the student's proficiency and bring proficiency challenges in advance. If already challenged, then the input materials of CWT will be i+2 which above textbooks and teaching-supplement based materials are i+1. An internal evaluation of the difficulty of reading materials across three dimensions: vocabulary, syntax, and the Flesch Reading Ease formula^[27]. The objective was to determine the difficulty level of the reading sections in the 2019 PEP edition senior high school English textbooks—Compulsory Books 1–3 and Elective Compulsory Books 1–2—and to examine whether their organization follows a progressive principle of increasing difficulty. Data analysis revealed minimal disparity in average word length across the five textbooks. While the percentage of new vocabulary fluctuated from unit to unit within each volume, the average new word rate across all five textbooks remained relatively consistent. In terms of syntax, the average sentence length across the five volumes did not increase progressively. Furthermore, the distribution of various sentence structures did not reflect a principle of moving from simpler to more complex forms. The readability of the texts neither followed a gradual increase in difficulty from one textbook to the next, nor did it show a consistently progressive trend in reading difficulty between units within individual textbooks. She suggested that teachers can respond to these findings by appropriately

expanding students' knowledge based on their existing foundations and newly acquired information, thereby enhancing their motivation for English learning. According to her research, the English books already contain the difficulty in students' understanding in the reading materials in the textbook. The textbooks serve as essential content and tools for both student learning and teacher instruction, while the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), as a high-stakes selective test, acts as a critical means of assessing instructional effectiveness and exerts significant washback effects on teaching and learning^[28]. The results indicate that the Gaokao passages were significantly more difficult than the textbook passages in two key readability measures. Moreover, notable differences were observed between the two in the principal components of text readability, including syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, referential cohesion, and connective cohesion. The study between the senior high school English textbooks and the English language sections of the 2020–2023 National Gaokao examinations proves the materials from textbook is easier than the text in NCEE. The above studies prove there is significant difficulty level between the textbooks and the materials in NCEE, textbooks already contain difficulty for students' understanding, and thus choosing materials above textbooks and below the NCEE is hard and even I+2 for students to learn.

Furthermore, the materials selected by teachers should be fluent and thematic relevance, different students have different interests and different language proficiency, how the materials can meet both different interests and fluency readable for different students not by the teachers. The readability not only aids teachers in optimizing their instruction and assists textbook compilers in evaluating materials, but also helps students develop personalized learning methods^[29]. It is poised to play a crucial role in foreign language teaching. They also found that the overall control of readability in the PEP senior high school English textbooks is generally reasonable. However, the sequencing of reading passages within each unit requires further refinement. Additionally, the study found that the difficulty level of reading materials does not necessarily correlate with their level of interest. The text readability refers to the ease with which written language can be read and understood. A text with high readability is comparatively easier to read than other texts. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics defines it as: "Readability is the ease with which a written text can be read and understood. Readability depends on many factors, including (a) the average length of sentences in a passage; (b) the number of new words contained in a passage; and (c) the grammatical complexity of the language used". Procedures used to measure readability are called "readability formulas"^[30]. The teachers should adopt a student-centered approach by integrating text readability with student interests^[31]. This involves selecting engaging and appropriately leveled autonomous reading materials that motivate students to read willingly and enthusiastically, thereby genuinely enhancing their reading proficiency. The above studies pointed out that readability of the chosen materials is critical, however, chosen materials also need to align with student interest but how to meet different interests in unknown.

In summary, effective CWT teaching requires teachers to balance exam requirements with student engagement through strategic material selection, innovative teaching approaches that transform exam materials into creative springboards, and careful consideration of readability principles and student interests to maintain appropriate challenge levels while fostering continuation writing enthusiasm.

5. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several specific theoretical contributions to second language writing and input-based instruction. First, it refines Input Hypothesis by demonstrating that, in continuation writing tasks, input functions not merely as comprehensible language exposure but as a structural and conceptual template for written production. The findings indicate that students rely on the narrative logic, discourse organization, and

pragmatic cues embedded in the input text to construct coherent continuations, suggesting that input operates at both linguistic and discourse levels. This extends existing input theory by highlighting its multi-layered role in writing tasks that require textual alignment rather than free composition.

Second, the study provides concrete classroom-based evidence for the Noticing Hypothesis in L2 writing. The observed improvement in students' lexical choice and syntactic accuracy occurred primarily when the teacher explicitly directed learners' attention to salient language features in the input, such as narrative tense, evaluative adjectives, and sentence patterns expressing causality or emotion^[32]. This indicates that noticing is not incidental but instructionally induced in continuation writing contexts. The study therefore clarifies the mechanism through which input is transformed into intake, emphasizing the importance of guided noticing in writing development.

Third, from a Sociocultural Theory perspective, this research specifies how teacher mediation operates in continuation writing instruction. The teacher's scaffolding—through modeling text analysis, asking inferential questions, and co-constructing possible plot developments—served as a mediational tool that enabled students to internalize genre conventions and narrative reasoning. This finding advances sociocultural accounts of L2 writing by illustrating how input, mediation, and output are interconnected processes occurring within learners' zone of proximal development. Finally, the study contributes to genre-based writing theory by showing that repeated engagement with input texts strengthens students' awareness of narrative genre constraints, such as point of view consistency and resolution strategies, which are essential for successful continuation writing.

6. Managerial (Practical) implications

At the classroom management level, the findings suggest that senior high school English teachers should adopt a systematic input-design approach to continuation writing instruction. Specifically, input texts should be selected based on clear criteria, including appropriate linguistic difficulty, explicit narrative structure, and rich contextual clues that allow multiple plausible continuations. Teachers should allocate instructional time for pre-writing input analysis, during which students are guided to identify narrative gaps, character motivations, and key language features, rather than moving directly from reading to writing.

At the instructional management level, the study indicates that teachers should implement tiered scaffolding strategies to address proficiency differences. For lower-proficiency students, this may include highlighting reusable lexical chunks, providing sentence starters, or jointly constructing sample continuations^[33]. For higher-proficiency students, teachers can encourage greater creative transformation of input by focusing on implicit meanings and alternative narrative developments. Such differentiated input utilization helps prevent over-reliance on copying while promoting original language production.

At the school and curriculum management level, the findings imply that continuation writing should be supported through teacher training and instructional guidelines. School administrators should provide professional development workshops that focus on how to exploit input texts pedagogically, including techniques for guided noticing, discourse analysis, and formative feedback aligned with input use. Curriculum designers should also incorporate explicit learning objectives related to input interpretation and transformation in continuation writing tasks, ensuring consistency between teaching practices and assessment criteria^[34]. By managing input as a core instructional resource rather than a passive reading passage, schools can significantly enhance students' writing competence and exam readiness.

7. Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopted a single-case study design focusing on one senior high school English teacher, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Teaching beliefs, instructional competence, and classroom context may have influenced how input was selected and utilized, meaning that the observed practices may not fully represent continuation writing instruction in other schools or regions. Second, the study primarily relied on qualitative data such as classroom observations, interviews, and teaching materials, which, although rich in detail, do not allow for precise measurement of the magnitude of input effects on students' writing performance. The absence of large-scale quantitative evidence restricts the ability to make causal claims regarding the relationship between input and writing outcomes. Additionally, the study did not systematically compare different types or levels of input, such as simplified versus authentic texts or teacher-mediated versus independent input processing. As a result, it remains unclear which specific input features exert the strongest influence on students' continuation writing quality. Another limitation concerns learner variables: differences in students' proficiency levels, motivation, and prior writing experience were not independently controlled, which may have affected how students engaged with and benefitted from the input. Finally, the study examined input use over a relatively short instructional period, making it difficult to capture the long-term developmental impact of input-based continuation writing instruction.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. First, researchers are encouraged to conduct multi-case or comparative studies involving teachers from different schools, regions, or instructional backgrounds to enhance the external validity of findings. Such studies could explore how variations in teacher mediation styles influence the effectiveness of input in continuation writing tasks. Second, future studies may adopt mixed-methods or experimental designs to quantitatively examine the impact of specific input features—such as lexical density, narrative complexity, or discourse markers—on students' writing performance, thereby providing stronger empirical evidence for input–output relationships. Further research should also investigate learner-level factors, including proficiency, cognitive strategies, and affective variables, to better understand how different groups of students process and transform input during continuation writing. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how sustained exposure to input-based instruction influences students' writing development over time. In addition, future research could explore the role of technology-enhanced input, such as digital texts, multimodal input, or AI-assisted scaffolding, in supporting continuation writing instruction. By expanding the scope, methods, and contexts of investigation, future research can deepen theoretical understanding and inform more effective pedagogical practices for continuation writing in senior high school English education.

8. Conclusion

In this section, four themes concluded according to the research questions: material selection focus, CWT genre, problems with selection materials and material selection strategies. Theme 1 reflects the material selection focus for teacher should consider based on theme with Gaokao trends and relatability emotional resonance appropriate; exam relevance rely on NCEE requirements; materials difficulty in control and understanding; stimulate curiosity and twist and turns attention for students' interests; inner elements of the selected materials contains text sequence, positive value guidance and fluency thematic relevance; Theme 2 reflects the CWT genre focus on the content of genre which CWT required and the aid of the genre involves the steps and content of teaching guide papers. Theme 3 reflects the problems with selection materials focusing on discourse problems and text quality problems. The discourse problem involves mismatch problem, thematic coverage limitation, thematic relevance and cultural accessibility problem, exam alignment and student engagement imbalanced. Text quality problem involves the high-quality text

needed. Theme 4 reflects on the materials selection strategies based on diversified material resources which consist of teaching supplement-based materials, internet-based materials and exam-based materials. Material selection methods involve tiered adaptation approach, cultural cognitive bridge, hybrid material bank, expanding material platform and word explanation substitution. Approach self-assessment by teachers shows approach benefits to teachers and students. Analysis for research question 1 reveals four interconnected themes that delineate how teachers plan and prepare for CWT in senior high schools, with material selection forming the cornerstone of this process. The foundational theme, material selection focus, highlights the complex criteria teachers navigate, prioritizing materials that balance external demands like Gaokao trends and exam relevance with internal pedagogical goals such as thematic appropriateness, emotional resonance, controlled difficulty, and student engagement through intriguing narratives. This is complemented by a deliberate focus on CWT genre, where teachers strategically select specific genres and employ guided instructional papers to structure student learning effectively.

However, this preparatory stage is fraught with challenges, as captured in the theme of problems with selection materials, where teachers grapple with significant discourse-level issues—such as a mismatch with student needs, limited thematic coverage, cultural inaccessibility, and an imbalance between exam preparation and engagement—as well as a fundamental scarcity of high-quality texts. In direct response to these challenges, the fourth theme, material selection strategies, emerges, detailing a sophisticated toolkit teachers employ. This includes diversifying resources through teaching supplements, online databases, and past exam papers, and applying adaptive methods like tiered adaptation for different proficiency levels, building cultural cognitive bridges, and creating hybrid material banks. Ultimately, this comprehensive analysis illustrates that planning for CWT is a highly strategic endeavor where teachers act as critical curators, constantly balancing prescription with creativity, and external standards with student needs to build a responsive and effective writing curriculum. Based on these, how teachers plan and prepare for CWT at senior high schools is known.

Declarations

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author Contributions

XD conceived and designed the study, collected and organized the database and performed the analysis. XD wrote the manuscript and contributed to manuscript revision. All authors read and approved the final submitted version.

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of School of Foreign Languages, Hainan Normal University in China. (approval number: WGY202508). All methods were carried out in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations stipulated by this committee.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent for publication was obtained from all participants.

Clinical trial number

not applicable

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Appendix

Levels of Academic Quality Standard for Senior High School

For English Writing Quality Level 1, writing ability target requirement requires students to attain two small points.

Point A: 1. Be able to briefly describe their own or other people's experiences in written form, express opinions and give examples. 2. Be able to introduce major Chinese and foreign festivals and excellent traditional Chinese culture. 3. The vocabulary and grammatical structures used in written expression can convey the main meaning.

Point B: 1. Be able to use cohesive means of discourse to construct written discourse, express meaning, and embody the logical correlation of meaning. 2. Can improve the expression effect with the help of multimodal discourse resources.

For English Writing Quality Level 2, writing ability target requirement requires students to attain two small points.

Point C: 1. The ability to describe one's own or others' experiences, express ideas, and express emotions and attitudes in a written manner. 2. Can describe the process of occurrence and development of events. 3. Can describe the characteristics of people or things, explain concepts. 4. Can summarize the main content of the reading material or continue to write the text.

Point D: 1. In the process of expression, can choose words and grammatical structures purposefully, accurately express the meaning, and embody the logical correlation of the meaning. 2. Can use multi-modal discourse resources to achieve special expression effect.

For English Writing Quality Level 3, writing ability target requirement also requires students to attain two small points.

Point E: 1. The ability to reproduce imaginary experiences and things in writing, and to comment on facts, opinions, and experiences. 2. Can create different forms of discourse according to the need.

Point F: 1. The ability to use cohesive devices to effectively improve the coherence of written texts. 2. Use special vocabulary and grammar to express meaning creatively.