

How to Teach English Writing in a Rural Chinese Senior High School

Xiaojun Yang¹, Fuhua Tan^{2*}

¹ Foreign Studies School, Xiangnan University, Chenzhou, 423000 Hunan, China

² No. 3 High School, Liling County, Zhuzhou, 412212 Hunan, China

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: This study first summarizes the existing problems of English writing teaching in Chinese Senior High Schools, and then discusses how to the Scaffolding Teaching Theory and Comprehensible Output Hypothesis into English practical writing. When teaching English practical writing, teachers are advised to follow four principles to guide students to build “scaffolding” in writing by outlining. After that, this study explores how to improve students’ English writing ability from three aspects: writing training, composition evaluation, sample analysis and recitation. This study shows that teachers can help students improve their expression ability by strengthening English writing training.

1. Introduction

Under the new background of *the National College Entrance English Examination* (NCEEE) in China, Chinese, Maths and English are compulsory subjects. Their total score of the National College Entrance English Examination (Volume I) is 150, which is made up of listening, reading comprehension, cloze, filling blanks, proofreading and English writing whose full score is 25.

Most high school teachers feel English writing difficult and important to effectively teach. The *National Unified Test Syllabus for College Entrance English Examination (NUTSCEEE)* in 2019 [1] requires the candidates to express their ideas in English in the writing section. Candidates should be able to: (1) convey information clearly and coherently and express their meaning; (2) effectively use the language knowledge they have learned. Many English teachers from high schools try to explore their own teaching modes of writing according to the requirements of the test syllabus, but the teaching effect is not obvious. Tang Xinqiu [2] has explained the three reasons for the main problems in the teaching mode of these teachers. An English teacher had better ask his/her students to write a practical composition every week, and he/she had better correct the compositions within this week. In addition, in order to improve students' written expression ability, teachers are advised to guide students from three aspects: writing training, writing evaluation, sample analysis and recitation.

Previous studies show that the Scaffolding Instruction/Teaching (STT) and Comprehension Output Hypothesis (COH) are very helpful and effective in teaching English writing for high-school teachers in China, so they are selected as the theoretical frameworks for this study.

2. The Scaffolding Teaching Theory and Comprehension Output Hypothesis

Scaffolding Instruction/Teaching, which was ingeniously named according to the physical scaffolds, is a teaching strategy originating from the social-cultural theory of Lev Vygotsky and is especially famous for his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This teaching strategy includes teaching by promoting students to work collaboratively in class tasks which would be too hard for them to finish on their own. The Scaffolding Teaching Theory refers to that teachers first build a kind of “scaffolding” between students' existing cultural knowledge level and learning tasks, and then with the help of this “scaffolding”, teachers promote students to master, construct and internalize new knowledge and skills, and then timely remove the “scaffolding” so that students can

independently complete their learning tasks, and finally achieve a learning goal.

Swain [3] put forward the theory of “Comprehensible Output Hypothesis” which emphasizes that language output is an indispensable part of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and pointed out that if the learners want to speak second language just as native-speakers, they should have more chances to do sufficient comprehensible language output and grasp more opportunities to produce second language. Because language output not only can improve their skills of using second language, but also let the learners know what their deficiency in language learning.

Swain in 1995 [4] furthers her Output Hypothesis which concludes there are three functions of Output Hypothesis in the process of language learning: Noticing / triggering function, Hypothesis-testing function and The meta-linguistic function.

3. Literature Review

Four theses under the topic of “the Scaffolding Teaching Theory and English writing teaching in high schools” outside China have been found from ScienceDirect search. Geert and Steenbeek [5] have reinterpreted a relatively standard definition of scaffolding in the context of dynamic systems theory and emphasized that scaffolding cannot be understood outside the context of a dynamic approach of learning and (formal or informal) teaching. They provide a dynamic systems model of learning and teaching in which the notion of scaffolding plays a central role. Ahangari, Hejazi and Razmjou [6] support that scaffolding technique would help students progress themselves and become autonomous learners. The current research proved that scaffolding technique aids students to upgrade their knowledge of English writing and eventually become independent learners. Scaffolding is a guiding light that leads the learner towards independent learning. Highest level of support by the teacher at the beginning is necessary for the learner to eventually become autonomous in the learning path and achieve the ability to complete activities on her/his own without any help from the teacher. Shooshtari and Mir [7] elaborates that through scaffolding, a social construct which is interrelated to ZPD, in a classroom teachers as well as non-novice learners can help novice individuals to internalize language dialogically or to perform a task/skill independently. Gunawardena, Sooriyampola and Walisundara [8] has reported that inquired Sri Lankan teachers’ perceptions of developing students’ thinking skills in teaching reading in ESL and has revealed several interesting findings about the impact of the cultural environment in teaching thinking. When teachers were questioned about thinking skills, they unanimously thought that they were responsible for developing students’ moral values as part of their thinking focus education. The potential reasons for teachers’ perceptions about moral values could be their cultural and religious background where they take the leading role to cultivate social and cultural values that are underpinned in Buddhist philosophy.

From CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), we have found out 9 master’s theses and 6 journal articles under the topic of “Scaffolding Teaching Theory and English writing teaching in high schools”. The common feature of all the 15 papers is that the Scaffolding Teaching Theory has been applied into the teaching practice of English writing in high schools from the perspective of synchronic studies and most of them have proved that the Scaffolding Teaching Theory (STT) is conducive to improving the expression ability and English writing scores of students through empirical research. There is only one master’s thesis under the topic of “Output Hypothesis and English writing teaching in high schools” in it. Zhang Yu [9] has got two major findings in her study.

However, a diachronic study of English Practical Writing in high schools in and out of China has never been done before so far as we know, so the researchers have been carrying out this study with the help of three research projects.

4. Research Methods

Two research methods are employed in this study: questionnaires and tests.

4.1 Questionnaires

The subjects of this experiment are 56 students in Class 1802 with two questionnaires of eight

questions: the first questionnaire is about students' attitude towards English practical writing with four choices and is carried out at the beginning of the semester. It is mainly used for knowing about the authentic writing level of students in Class 1802. It can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Questionnaire about Students' Attitudes in Class 1802 towards English Practical Writing

No.	Questions
1	Are you interested in English practical writing? A. very much B. so-so C. a little D. not at all
2	Will you do English writing practice autonomously? A. very often B. sometimes C. often D. not at all
3	What's your English practical writing level? A. very good B. good C. not so good D. not good
4	What's your English practical writing motivation? A. individual interest B. teacher's request C. for examination D. all of the above
5	Will you accumulate English practical writing materials in daily learning consciously? A. yes B. often C. generally not D. not at all
6	Can you finish the English practical writing assigned by teacher in time? A. Yes, I can. B. generally can C. not sure D. No, I cannot.
7	Are you satisfied with your former English teacher's teaching in English practical writing? A. very satisfied B. so-so C. not such satisfied D. not at all
8	Which kind of English practical writing correction method do you like? A. teacher's correction B. peer correction C. self-correction D. APP online correction

Students should answer the questionnaire carefully and seriously. The answer to the first questionnaire is collected and the results from the questionnaire are showed in Table 2.

Table 2 the Results of the First Questionnaire

Items/Answer	A		B		C		D	
	Persons	Ratio	Persons	Ratio	Persons	Ratio	Persons	Ratio
1	12	21.4%	27	48.2%	7	12.5%	10	17.9%
2	6	10.7%	12	21.4%	8	14.3%	30	53.6%
3	3	5.4%	9	16%	29	51.8%	15	26.8%
4	3	5.4%	33	58.9%	13	23.2%	7	12.5%
5	5	8.9%	8	14.3%	16	28.6%	27	48.2%
6	10	17.9%	22	39.3%	6	10.7%	18	32.1%
7	9	16.1%	25	44.6%	16	28.6%	6	10.7%
8	47	83.9%	4	7.1%	3	5.4%	2	3.6%

According to Table 2, the students' interest in English practical writing is just so so. Most of them don't accumulate English writing materials in daily learning consciously, or don't do English writing practice autonomously. Most of their writing motivation is teacher's request and most of them think that their writing level is not so good. Most of them like teacher's correction.

The second questionnaire is about the feedback of students' on scaffolding teaching theory after experiment, including students' viewpoints on scaffolding teaching mode and their participation situation in classroom activities. It can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 Questionnaire about Students' Feedback in Class 1802 on Scaffolding Theory-Based English Practical Writing Teaching

No.	Questions
1	Whether scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching mode can inspire your writing motivation or not? Yes/ No
2	Whether scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching can improve your writing level to a certain degree? Yes/ No
3	Whether scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching method is much effective than other traditional English writing teaching methods? Yes/ No
4	Whether you can be positive enough to take part in the group discussion? Yes/ No
5	Do you think the group communication discussion method in English practical writing class is effective or not? Yes/ No
6	Do you think group discussion is good for expanding your mind or not? Yes/ No
7	Do you think scaffolding map before English practical writing necessary?

	Yes/ No
8	Do you like peer evaluation in writing composition? Yes/ No
9	Can you carefully correct your own composition according to the correction of your teacher and your classmate? Yes/ No
10	Do you wish your teacher to continue adopting scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching in the future? Yes/ No

Students should answer the questionnaire carefully and seriously. The answer to the second questionnaire is collected and the results from the questionnaire are showed in Table 4.

Table 4 the Results of the Second Questionnaire

Items/Answer	Yes		No	
	Persons	Ratio	Persons	Ratio
1	50	89.3%	6	10.7%
2	52	92.9%	4	7.1%
3	53	94.6%	3	5.4%
4	53	94.6%	3	5.4%
5	51	91.1%	5	8.9%
6	49	87.5%	7	12.5%
7	52	92.9%	4	7.1%
8	48	85.7%	8	14.3%
9	50	89.3%	6	10.7%
10	54	96.4%	2	3.6%

According to Table 4, the majority of the students argue that scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching mode can inspire their writing motivation and improve their writing level. Most of them think that scaffolding map before English practical writing is necessary, and hope that English teachers will continue adopting the scaffolding theory-based English practical writing teaching method in the future.

4.2 Tests

Tests are a good kind of research method of making comparison and contrast on students' scores. The final-term English test scores from Class 1802 of the second semester of Grade One in 2019 is regarded as the reference score and the final-term English test scores from Class 1802 of the first semester of Grade Two in 2019 is thought of as the comparative score. After the whole semester's experiment, can our study help the students to improve their average scores of English practical writing greatly? Can our study help the students to improve their average scores of English final-term test effectively?

4.2.1 Flow Chart of the Experiment

The flow chart of the experiment is made up of six parts: topic selection, outlining, writing training, composition evaluation, sample analysis and recitation, data analysis and findings. It can be seen in Fig 1.

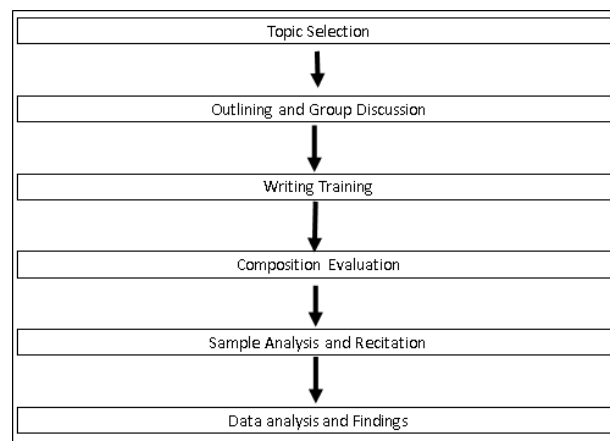


Fig.1 Flow Chart of the Experiment

4.2.2 Topic Selection

The *English Curriculum Standard for Senior High Schools (ECSSHS)* [11] explains the core literacy of English is divided into four dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability and possesses important personal and social values. The four core qualities are of mutual integration & penetration and common development.

We are required to select the topics of English writing based on *English Curriculum Standard for Senior High Schools* and the compositions of National Volume 1 of the National College Entrance English Examination in the past three years. Only in this way can the researchers help the students to improve their core literacy of English and explore some proposition laws of English writing. Through the three years of teaching writing, there is a common feature that candidates should use English to introduce Chinese cultures to foreigners and tell Chinese stories well in English. The feature of this proposition meets the requirements of “cultural awareness” of the core literacy. So, we propose that the selection of the students’ composition topics should follow the following four principles.

A. The topic of composition should promote the Chinese culture and tell Chinese stories well.

If foreign students want to learn about the Chinese culture, they had better first learn Chinese well. To promote the Chinese culture, Chinese students should first learn English well. Writing is a very important part of language skills, because high schools’ students are required to write down which part of Chinese culture they want to promote and which Chinese stories they want to tell before they wish foreigners understand Chinese culture and stories better. Chinese culture is diverse and unique, yet harmoniously blended-an invaluable asset to the world. The topics of Chinese culture mainly include Chinese food, World Heritage sites, China's Spring Festival, Kungfu, and Beijing opera, etc. There are numerous Chinese stories. The researchers select two topic compositions below written by their students.

Topic 1

If you are Li Hua, your English friend Peter wrote to you to ask how to learn Chinese well. Please write a letter of proposal according to the following points to encourage young foreign friends to learn Chinese well.

B. The topic content should be closely related to students' life reality, and each unit theme should be selected as the topic.

We believe that unit topics are related to the learning contents, which can reproduce the vocabulary and sentence patterns learned in the unit. This will not only improve students' writing ability, but also increase their chances of using the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge learned in the unit, and help them consolidate what they have learned. The title of Unit One from *Advance with English* (Module 5) is “getting along with others”. In the process of “getting along with others”, you may encounter many problems and make many friends. Therefore, the researchers propose the following composition.

Topic 2

Please write an English composition on friendship.

C. The topic of composition should be diversified to fully reflect the learning life of senior-high schools’ students

The learning life of high-schools’ students is busy and colorful as well. In view of this, we ensure the diversity of topics when choosing composition topics, which involve high schools’ learning life, growing pains, health, friendship, love, science and technology, literature, music, art, film and other aspects, which comprehensively reflects the learning life of high-school students. According to this principle, and combined with Unit 3 *Project GM food: Hope or danger*, we propose the following composition:

Topic 3

If you're Jim, you know that the local supermarket plans to sell cloned animal food. Please write a letter to the manager to persuade him to give up the plan.

D. The topic of composition should be helpful for students to enhance their national identity and feelings of home

The *New English Curriculum Standard for Senior High Schools* states cultural awareness

embodies the value orientation of the core literacy of English discipline. The cultivation of cultural awareness helps students to enhance national identity and feelings of home, improve cultural self-confidence, establish a sense of a shared community for mankind, learn to behave themselves, and grow up to be civilized and socially responsible men. Under the guidance of this principle, the year of 2019 coincides with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, so the researchers propose the following composition.

Topic 4

Every National Day is China's birthday. Please write an English essay on National Day to China Daily.

4.2.3 Outlining and Group Discussion

This study applies the Scaffolding Teaching Theory into guiding our students how to make writing outlines of their writing topics, and build a kind of “scaffolding” that can help students to write the composition. With its help, students are encouraged to finish the composition. After half a year's writing teaching, the “scaffolding” of outline is removed timely so that students can complete writing tasks independently. Taking the topic “friendship” as an example, the researchers list the outline as follows in Fig 2.

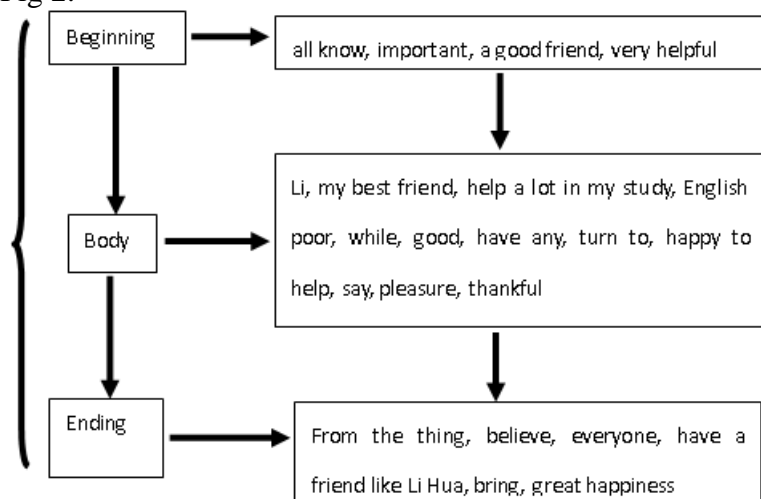


Fig.2 Scaffolding Map of the Topic “Friendship”

Group discussion is an important way to exchange different ideas of different students and clarify the thinking of English writing clearly, so it is great important to divide the small groups accurately. There are 56 students in Class 1802 and the whole class is divided into 14 small groups. Each small group is an independent team consisting of 4 teammates. One leader must be selected from each team and each team should include at least one female student. All the four students in each team should sit together face to face in class so that they can communicate with each other conveniently.

4.3 Writing Training

In the second semester of 2019, there are 20 weeks in total, and the grade we taught is Grade Two. We ask the students of Class 1802 to write a practical composition every week and 20 practical compositions in a semester. Objectively speaking, the intensity of this training is quite large. We hold only by strengthening the writing training can the researchers help improve the students' expression ability, and improve the average score of Class 1802 in the final-term examination.

4.4 Composition Evaluation

The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis was employed in this study. According to the hypothesis-testing function, errors are inevitable in the process of language learning, esp. in the students’ compositions. The researchers should summarize the main problems from grammatical errors in a practical composition.

Therefore, our composition evaluation consists of three parts: (1) presenting the teacher's scores in

three score segments with tables; (2) main problems; (3) grammatical errors.

The comments on topic 1 are in Table 5:

Table 5 Score Distribution of “Learning Chinese” Composition in Class 1802

score classification	20~25	15~19	0~14
Persons	9	29	18

(Note: there are 56 students in the class. The total score of Composition is 25 scores.)

Main problems: ① The handwriting is too poor and the roll surface is not clean and tidy; ② There is only one or two correct sentences in the whole composition of some students; ③ There are many grammatical errors in the whole composition of some students. ④ They are not good at using stance words, esp. stance adverbs (such as *surprisingly*, *fortunately*) to accurately express their ideas and stance.

Their typical grammatical errors are as follows:

A. Misuse of *much* and *many*;

B. Misuse of such sentence patterns as “Suggest + that + (should) (subjunctive mood) + do”, “tell sb. to do sth./how to do sth.”, “as many + countable plural + as sb. can. /as possible”, etc.

C. Misuse of some prepositions such as “in+ language”, for example:

Incorrect: You can read books and watch TV shows used Chinese.

Correct: You can read books and watch TV shows in Chinese.

E. Incorrect diction, for example:

Incorrect: You'd better look at Chinese books and TV shows.

Correct: You'd better read Chinese books and watch TV shows.

F. Misuse or under-use of English stance adverbs such as “surprisingly” “clearly”, etc.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

English writing teaching were conducted 20 times in Class 1802 in the second semester of 2019, and students' composition scores are divided into three score segments of 20~25, 15~19, and 0~14. Now, the number of scores in the three score segments of 20 compositions is shown in Fig 3:

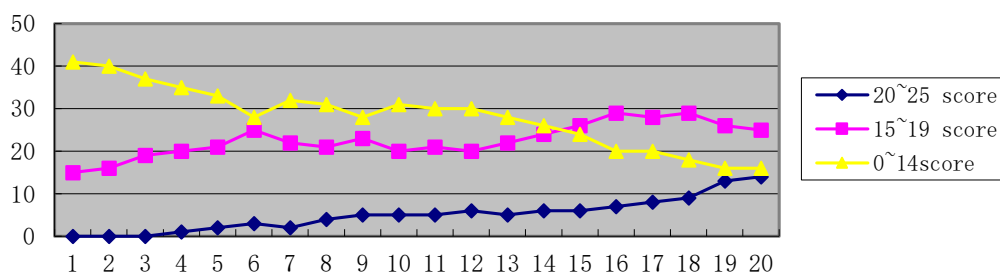


Fig.3 Line Chart of Three Score Segments of 20 Compositions in Class 1802

According to Fig3, the blue line shows an upward trend, which shows that more and more students are capable of writing excellent compositions in practical writing; the pink line shows an upward trend on the whole, which shows that more and more students are able to pass the test of practical writing; the yellow line shows a downward trend on the whole, which shows that the number of students who have failed in the test is less and less. As a result, the average score of practical writing in Class 1802 has gradually improved. This is illustrated in Fig 4.

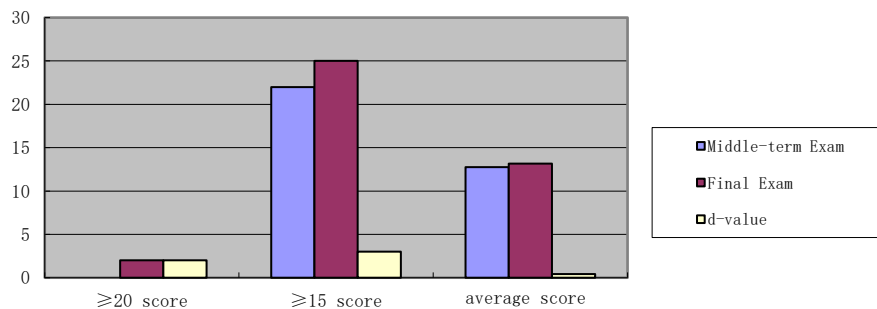


Fig.4 Comparison of the Practical Writing Data between the Mid-Term Exam and Final Exam of Class 1802

The Standard Deviation ($S_d=3.90$) of practical writing in the final exam of Class 1802 is calculated in the Excel Form of score comparison data of practical writing between the mid-term exam and final-term exam of Class 1802 by means of STDEVP Function Formula. The Average

Difference ($\bar{d}=1.96$) of progress value between the final-term examination and the mid-term examination of the whole class is calculated in Excel Form, $df=56-1=55$, $t_{0.05}^{55}=1.67$, the Statistics

$$t = \frac{\bar{d}}{S_d} \left(\frac{S_d}{\sqrt{n}} \right) = \frac{\bar{d}\sqrt{n}}{S_d} = \frac{1.96\sqrt{56}}{3.90} = 3.76 > 1.67, \text{ so there are significant differences between the}$$

mid-term examination and the final-term examination of practical writing in Class 1802. The t-value data of Class 1802 shows that teachers can improve students' expression ability by practicing practical writing once a week.

The average score of English writing of Class 1802 has been improved, so the final-term exam scores of class 1802 has been improved accordingly, as is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Comparison between the Final-Term Test Scores of the First Semester

Items/Test	Grade One's Scores	Grade Two's Scores	d-value
number of excellent students	28	34	6
average score of 40 students	91.0	107.2	16.2
class level line	-1.3	2.0	3.3

Grade Two in Class 1802 and the Second Semester of Grade One in Class 1802

(Note: the number of excellent students is calculated based on the English excellent line.)

The English excellent line=the total number of history students in the whole grade×60%; the average score of 40 students refers to the average score of all subjects of the top 40 students in the class; the class level line refers to the average score of all students in the class which exceeds the average score of history students of the whole grade)

According to Table 6, compared with the previous two data, the number of excellent students has improved by 6; the average score of 40 students has improved by 16.2; the class level line has improved by 3.3. The progress is very obvious, which is mainly due to the improvement of practical writing ability of students in Class 1802.

6. Conclusion

How to improve students' expression ability through effective writing teaching methods has been long cherished by senior-high schools' English teachers for many years. Therefore, we have made a useful attempt to carry out a study of English writing in senior high schools for three years. After 20 times of intensive training in 20 weeks, Chart 2, Table 5 and Table 6 show that the average score of composition and the overall performance of Class 1802 are greatly improved with significant differences. Because this research has obvious effect on increasing the number of excellent students and the class level line in Class 1802, it has certain applied values. Our practice can be popularized in

English practical writing teaching of senior-high schools in China.

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