# An Overview of Empirical Studies on "Continuation Task" in China

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## Abstract

"Writing after reading" is a method proposed by Professor Chuming Wang for promoting foreign language learning and teaching. With the deepening of related researches, Professor Wang has recently promoted it as "Xu Theory". In order to better understand the development and the present situation of the study of this method in China, through searching the theme "continuation task" and time range "2017-2023", this paper has found that there are 46 papers published in Chinese key journals of foreign languages, including 37 empirical articles. Based on those papers, this paper makes a review of the "writing after reading" task during the past 7 years, from the perspectives of its theoretical background and its present research status, summarizes the existing problems in current research and puts forward some suggestions.

**Keywords:** writing after reading, Xu Theory, SLA, foreign language teaching

## 1. Introduction

Pickering & Garrod proposed the Interactive Alignment Model in 2004. They hold the view that collaboration, embodied in interaction, is the key to a successful interpersonal conversation. A basic idea of this model is that alignment at one level leads to alignment at other levels. Atkinson et al. (2007) enriched the theory and extended the alignment effect existing in interpersonal relationships to relationships between the person and the situation. They emphasize that collaboration is the key to second language acquisition. Learning is a process in which learners constantly meet and collaborate with the social cognitive environment, and integrate learning experience into their own learning patterns, strategies and other knowledge structures.

In China, the foreign language long writing method, which was born in the late 1990s, introduced the way of encouraging students to write long writing by a method similar to writing after reading (Wang Chuming et al., 2000), but it was not until Professor Wang Chuming put forward the model of "Learn-Together-Use-Together" in combination with the interactive alignment theory proposed by foreign scholars (Wang Chuming, 2009) and discussed the relationship between interaction and collaboration and foreign language teaching (Wang Chuming, 2010), that the specific teaching method of "continuation task" was formally brought into the vision of researchers. Since then, there has been growing domestic attention on "continuation task" and relevant empirical and non-empirical studies have been

gradually systematic and refined, aiming at verifying the promoting effect of this theory on language learning and exploring corresponding, specific and effective teaching methods.

In this paper, the academic journal papers published on CNKI with the theme of "continuation task" are retrieved. Finally, a total of 46 related research papers, including 37 empirical articles, were selected from Chinese core journals of foreign language, covering the time range from 2017 to 2023.

**2. Theoretical Accounts of Continuation Task**

The main theoretical basis for continuation task is alignment effect. In recent years, the phenomenon of interaction and alignment in language has attracted much attention. Chinese scholar Wang Chuming (2010), based on the interactive and collaborative model, proposed the effective path of foreign language learning: interaction→ understanding→ collaboration→ output→ acquisition. He emphasized that learners' language comprehension and output level are different, and their comprehension ability is always stronger than their output ability. This asymmetry will lead to the leveling effect, which is the potential driving force for language acquisition, that is, language is learned in the process of understanding and output. Strong interaction leads to strong alignment, while weak interaction leads to weak alignment. So in terms of foreign language learning, which way of learning involves more alignments? Interactive dialogue with native speakers is undoubtedly the best choice. In the dialogue, understanding and output are closely combined, interaction and alignment is strong, leveling effect is significant, and foreign language learning efficiency is therefore high. However, this kind of interaction only takes place in a dynamic context, and the quality of the language in the dialogue is not high, mostly incomplete and monotonous sentences. Such language features obviously do not meet the requirements of foreign language teaching, so it is extremely important to seek a "substitute". In view of this, Chinese scholar Wang Chuming (2010, 2012) proposed the method of "continuation task", and demonstrated the effect of it to promote learning from a theoretical perspective, which has great implications for foreign language teaching in China.

In a typical "continuation task", learners are asked to read an article without ending and then complete the end of the article according to the above ideas of the article. Its purpose is to closely combine learners' language understanding (reading) and output (writing), so as to produce an alignment effect to promote language learning. Wang Chuming believes that, compared with other foreign language learning tasks, continuation task has more advantages in promoting learning, because it combines understanding and output, imitation and creation, learning and application, and promotes learners' language acquisition and learning in a more efficient way. To this end, Wang Chuming put forward eight sub-continuation classes with "continuation" as the core on the basis of reading after writing, collectively calling them "continuation".

There are also some shortcomings in continuation task. For example, if learners do not fully understand the original text, they will not be able to interact effectively, and the alignment effect between language comprehension and language output will be weakened, thus affecting the quality of writing (Xin Sheng, 2017; Wang Chuming, 2018). To solve this problem, Wang Chuming (2018) proposed two variants of the continuation task, namely iterative continuation task and comparative continuation task, in order to solve the problems such as weak interaction and poor coordination in the process of continuation task.

**3. Present Research Status**

*3.1 Research Trend*

Based on the analyzing and summarizing of 46 papers, it is found that relevant researches in China show a steady increase trend, which indicates that there are more and more researchers in China who are interested in continuation task.

*3.2 Methodological Considerations*

On the basis of Gao Yihong et al.'s classification of research methods, research papers can be divided into empirical research and non-empirical research. Based on this method and according to the research contents, this paper conducted a classification of the 46 Chinese research papers on continuation task from 2017 to 2023, analyzing and summarizing the relevant empirical studies (see Table 1) as follows.

*3.3 Empirical Studies on Continuation Task*

**Table 1.** The empirical articles on continuation task from 2017 to 2023

| Year | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amount of empirical articles | 5 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 9 | 3 |

### 3.3.1 Participants

The oriented group of empirical research are mainly college students or high school students. College students include English majors and non-English majors, as well as foreign students (Chinese language learners).

The structure of language knowledge and cognitive level of junior high school students and primary school students are quite different from that of college students or high school students. Whether their acquisition of English grammar can be improved by continuation task and whether the task can produce obvious promoting effect remain to be investigated. Little research has been done on these learner groups.

### 3.3.2 Research Methodology

Overall, the studies on "continuation task" mainly adopt quantitative research methods, including controlled experiments, pre-and post tests, questionnaires, corpus retrieval analysis, etc., because it is mostly investigated in the field of language teaching, which needs a lot of empirical evidence. However, it should be noted that while quantitative studies are in a large proportion, there are more and more studies combining qualitative and quantitative methods since 2018. Qualitative research has more advantages in further exploring the mechanism and principle of "continuation task". For example, Jiang et al. (2019) adopted the methods of thinking-aloud and retrospective interview. The results prove that "continuation task" can build a rich foreign language context for learners, provide a support for language learning and help to reduce learners' dependence on the thinking pattern of native language. The multidimensional Rasch analysis conducted by Chen (2020), the meta analysis conducted by Wang (2021), the WTC questionnaire used by Wang (2022), as well as the digital + reinforce task based on VR technology adopted by Zhang (2023) also plays an important role in the quantitative and precise research of continuation task, which points out the direction for the interaction research of continuation task and its regulatory variables.

### 3.3.3 Research Content

The empirical researches aim to verify the role of "continuation task" in promoting learning, mainly focusing on the aspect of writing. Peng Hongying (2017) demonstrated the feasibility of continuation task in improving the coherence of second language writing. Yang Hua (2018) summarized the characteristics of continuation work and showed that, through deep reading and giving full play to the contextual "support" function of the original work, continuation can promote middle and advanced English learners to creatively imitate and use rhetoric higher than their own level of language output, so as to realize "promoting learning by continuation". Yu Qingping and Wang Luyao (2020) compared students' performance in argumentative writing under the condition of proposition writing and two kinds of comparative continuation tasks, and investigated the effect of comparative continuation task on promoting learning.

There are also many researches focusing on vocabulary, grammar and other aspects besides writing. In terms of vocabulary, Sun Qinmei and Wang Yu (2018) explored the effect of English learners' learning of articles under two different conditions: the continuation task and the reading task. Gu Jing and Zhou Yumei (2018) found that the instruction significantly intensifies lexical alignment and it improves accuracy in low-level students' writing, helping their writing more directional. Zhang Xiuqin, Wu Lifang, Zhang Qian (2019) compared the influence of different input modes on vocabulary acquisition in the same continuation task and the influence of different language proficiency on vocabulary acquisition in the same input mode through experiments. Sun Xin and Wang Yudan (2022) explored the effect of continuation task on English article learning. It is found that such task can promote the acquisition of English articles to a certain extent, especially in promoting the acquisition of indefinite articles and the promoting effect of definite articles needs to be further studied.

Yang Mei and Cai Miaoxia (2022) built a model of cooperative continuation task on the basis of continuation task and cooperative writing, and found that cooperative continuation task helps

to increase the interaction, effectively monitor the continuation process, strengthen the alignment effect, and promote second language vocabulary acquisition. Zhang Ge, Liu Meng and Shen Huaming (2022) investigated the influence of different interaction modes on the French lexical alignment by continuation task in which the participants are Chinese French majors. They found that teacher-student interaction was more beneficial to the alignment effect than peer interaction and independent learning.

In terms of grammar, Xin Sheng (2017) found in his experiment that the reinforced continuation task has obvious promoting effect, and the acquisition of subjunctive mood with simple form is easier than that with complex form. Ji Xiaoling and Zhou Anqin (2017) explored the influence of continuation task on the use of past tense in English and found that it can significantly help students improve the accuracy of using past tense.

In syntax, Wang Qi and Wang Chuming (2019) realized that learners cooperate with the input text when they continue to write. If the given text contains relative clauses, and then there are more relative clauses in the continuation, which promotes learning significantly. Two years later, Wang Qi (2021) targeted at English relative clauses and recruiting Chinese EFL learners as the subjects, examined whether aligned output induced by the continuation task facilitated L2 learning. The findings indicate that the continuation task facilitates L2 learning mainly due to its alignment effect with aligned output playing a crucial role.

As to discourse, Miao Haiyan (2017) found that discourse alignment also exists in foreign language writing interaction, but the intensity of alignment is restricted by context and learners will choose different strategies in different interactive contexts. Wang Qi and Cao Qin (2020) took English passive sentences as the target structure, exploring structural priming at the discourse level, and found that language proficiency was one of the important factors affecting priming effect. Xin Sheng and Li Lixia (2020) found that although the continuation was aligned with the input text in terms of syntactic complexity and length, the alignment of complexity did not affect the accuracy. Some studies explored alignment effect from the perspective of input genres, indicating that different genres had different influences on

alignment (Zhang Xiuqin & Zhang Qian, 2017; Xiong Shuhui, 2018).

Furthermore, Zhang Sumin and Zhang Jidong (2019) for the first time analyzed the dynamic development of English learners' continuation process from the perspective of formative assessment, and the results showed that iterative continuation task can significantly improve learners' form-meaning matching and reading ability, but its promoting effect varies with different test tasks and learners' language proficiency. Jiang Lin, Chen Yan et al. (2019) found that continuation task not only constructed a rich foreign language context for learners, but also inhibited their dependence on native thinking pattern and made up for the deficiency of native contextual knowledge. After that, Zhang Lin and Qin Ting (2020) investigated the influence of continuation task on writing anxiety and writing ability of English majors based on the teaching practice of English writing. The experimental data show that continuation task can reduce learners' writing anxiety and cultivate learners' positive emotion. In addition, it can also do benefit to the improvement of learners' writing ability. Then, Zhan Jianling, Jiang Lin and Huang Lingling (2022) designed an experiment examining the role of comparative continuation task in reducing second language writing anxiety, finding that it can reduce idea blank and language production pressure, stimulate positive emotion and motivation to express ideas, effectively relieving second language writing anxiety.

Iterative continuation task can enhance the interactive intensity of continuation and release its potential to promote learning, which is a new focus of "continuation task" research. In the study of Zhang Su-min and Zhao Jing (2020), for the first time, a short English novel was divided into several sections by using the Iterative continuation method, and the participants were asked to repeat the novel several times. Under the strong interaction driven by the "Iterative continuation task", the learning effect was very significant, indicating that the alignment effect was related to the intensity of interaction. By the advantages of case study and iterative continuation task, Jiang Lin and Zhan Jianling (2021) explored the positive second language self-development of an English learner who is not majored in English in iterative continuation task, which reveals the dynamic transformation

process between second language learning behavior and positive psychological qualities, serving as a useful reference for designing and implementing efficient iterative continuation tasks. Similarly, through case studies, Wu Boya, Wang Haihua, Wang Yuemei (2021) compared the alignment effect between continuation task and audio-visual continuation of four non-English majors. While Miao Haiyan and Wang Qi (2022) conducted the research with large samples. Using the fluency, grammatical accuracy and complexity as indicators, they investigates the multi-dimensional dynamic effects of Iterative continuation task on English writing in a one-semester teaching experiment.

At the same time, the researches on the factors influencing the effect of continuation task also spring up like mushrooms. For example, Zhang Xiuqin and Zhang Qian (2017) found that both argumentative writing and narrative writing can produce alignment effect, and the alignment effect of the former is significantly stronger than that of the latter, with the error rate being lower, which provides enlightenment for the teaching and research of different genres in continuation task. Wang Min and Cai Ning (2022) investigated the influence of the language complexity of input text on the language fluency, accuracy and complexity of Chinese learners' English writing in continuation task, indicating that the promoting effect of continuation task on different dimensions of second language development is regulated by the language complexity of input text. The research design of Wang Qi et al. (2022) reproduces the cue orientation of the input text's context and enhances the alignment effect, so as to make up for the shortcomings of continuation task. Gu Qiyi, Zhao Chanchan and Jin Xiafei (2022) explored the influence of topic familiarity on Chinese English learners' continuation task through an experimental study, finding that familiar topics can promote stronger interaction between learners and texts, while unfamiliar topics facilitate learners to acquire richer vocabulary. Qiu Hu and Wang Min (2022) studied the influence of input reinforcement on the alignment effect in continuation task, through which they believe that input reinforcement can increase learners' attention to language forms, enhance the alignment effect at the language level, and effectively improve the accuracy of language application.

Beside the Chinese EFL learners, there are also domestic researches on the factors that influence the behavior of learners learning Chinese as a second language in continuation task. For example, Wang Qi (2019) targeted foreign students and discussed the promoting effect of continuation task in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, which proved once again that continuation task did produce an alignment effect. He also found that for these foreign learners, if the Chinese books are presented in the way of word segmentation, the alignment effect is stronger and the learning effect is better.

As researchers generally agree on the alignment effect of continuation task but have different opinions on its effect intensity and the actors affecting its intensity, facing this, Ren Wei, Lv Xiaoxuan (2021) adopted a meta-analysis technology to integrate the empirical research results on the alignment effect of continuation task, and discussed the degree and influencing factors of the alignment effect. The results revealed that the genre had a moderating effect on alignment and fully verified that the continuation task can produce alignment effects on different linguistic aspects.

In addition, the application of "continuation task" in teaching practice and examination is also increasing. Zhou Yishu (2019) reports an action study on the implementation of continuation task to improve the effectiveness of teaching writing in college English classes. He carried out the training of continuation task for three semesters and achieved good results. The students' ability of expression, creative ability and critical thinking have been improved. Besides, to improve the scoring quality of the English continuation task in college entrance examination, optimize the task design, revise the scoring standard and strengthen the training of teachers, Chen Kang and Zhang Jie (2020) conducted a study on ensuring the rating quality of the continuation task in the national matriculation English test.

## 4. Research Prospect

In view of the above research status, the theoretical research on the learning promotion effect of "continuation task" has reached a relatively mature stage, and the empirical research and application research continue to deepen. However, there is still room for improvement in the reliability and validity of the empirical results, especially the whole research scope of "continuation theory" and the

expansion of its practical application.

*4.1 The Theoretical Basis Needs to Be Innovated and Developed*

In terms of research theory, the number of theories about continuation task is relatively old and scarce. Since 2012, when Wang Chuming proposed the effects of alignment, for nearly 12 years, results based on this theory accounted for a large amount of the total researches. Although there are new theories such as input enhancement theory, structural priming, interaction theory and cognitive processing theory, the number of core publications based on these theoretical perspective is very rare. It shows that the existing new emergent theories still need to be further tested and developed. As the process of conducting continuation task involves text, students, teachers, etc., future theoretical research can be expanded from the perspectives of text analysis, learners' thinking process, writing strategies and psychological changes, as well as teachers' teaching methods. In addition, researchers and educators can absorb the theoretical characteristics of different disciplines, such as cognition, psychology and pedagogy, so as to improve the innovativeness and preciseness of the research of "continuation task".

*4.2 The Scope of Targeted Participants Needs to Be Expanded*

From the perspective of the research participants, former studies pay too much attention to college students and neglects middle school students. Middle school students have poor autonomy in learning, so more attention should be paid to these students in the basic education stage, and an application system suitable for middle school students needs to be developed. In view of this, the targeted participants of future research should be extended to students in the compulsory education stage, so as to enhance the comprehensiveness and pertinence of the research. Besides, the targeted languages of current research are mainly English and Chinese, and there is only one research on French as L2 language, and there is almost no core research on other languages. Therefore, the follow-up research can further explore the research of Chinese and French as L2 languages so as to expand the generalizability of subsequent continuation task.

*4.3 The Factors Influencing the Promoting Effect Needs to Be Further Explored*

In previous studies, researchers have conducted more and more discussions on the learning promotion effect of "continuation task", but most of them focus on the characteristics of the material of the task, and pay little attention to learners. Learners of different age groups and different native cultures have obvious or subtle differences in acceptance, way of thinking, learning psychology and other aspects. The effect on promoting learning of "continuation task" is different due to the task, interaction intensity and especially individual differences. The design and application of "continuation task" needs to take cognitive, emotional and other factors into consideration, so as to achieve the optimal effect. The learner factor is also a part worth exploring in the future research.

*4.4 The Studies on the Application of Continuation Task in Teaching and Examination Remains to Be Increased*

As for the practical application of "continuous theory" in teaching, although it is used as a testing method in college entrance examination, its constructs, testing methods, scoring rules and so on have been controversial, which is a problem that needs to be solved in future research. In addition to giving play to the promoting effect of "continuation task" in the learning of specific language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, teachers can also explore the role of "continuation" in the cultivation of academic foreign language ability and ideological education in the classroom, exploring the potential value of "continuation" in education and teaching.

*4.5 The Research Scope and Direction Needs to Be Expanded and Deepened*

In the process of literature retrieval of "continuation task", this paper also found that writing after reading task accounted for a significant proportion of the three categories of continuation theory proposed by Professor Wang Chuming (2016), while there was insufficient research on translation and speaking tasks. In the near future, researchers can dig into the other categories of continuation theory.

The current research mainly analyzes the direct effect of "continuation", lacking the analysis of transfer effect, mostly focuses on a certain form of continuation, lacking of cross analysis; Besides, traditional research paradigms are mostly adopted, and results analysis based on

VR, E-Prime, ERPs and other modern technologies are few. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to carry out study on the transfer effect of "continuation" and study on individual differences, exploring the promoting role of "cross-continuation" such as "continuation translation plus continuation writing", "continuation speaking plus continuation writing", "continuation translation plus continuation speaking" and other "cross-continuation" in the learning of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. By comprehensively using modern technology to strengthen the input form, adjust task requirements and evaluation rules, future studies are advised to comprehensively explore the influence of linguistic and non-linguistic factors in "continuation task", so as to enrich the evidence of its effects and promote the development of "continuation theory".

*4.6 The Research Methods and Statistical Tools Needs to Be Diversified*

According to the above analysis, it can be found that current researchers tend to use traditional research tools such as pre-and post tests, interviews and questionnaires in data collection, which lack variety and consumes lots of time and manpower to some extent. With the advancement of artificial intelligence and new technology, the future research on "continuation task" is encouraged to utilize more diverse and scientific tools to collect data, such as meta-analysis, eye-tracking experiment, virtual reality technology, corpus retrieval analysis, etc., so as to quantify data more accurately and validate experimental results more comprehensively, which can also improve the reliability of research, shorten the research time, and save manpower and material resources.

**5. Conclusion**

After 12 years of development in China, continuation task has made notable progress in theoretical exploration and practical expansion. Based on the papers published on Chinese core journals, this study sorts out the research status of the continuation task in China from the aspects of research trend, research content, participants as well as research methodologies, point out the current existing problems in the research of continuation task in China, and puts forward the suggestions and directions of further development. The results show that: (1) The theoretical basis needs to be developed.

Apart from alignment effect, new theories such as input enhancement theory, structural priming, interaction theory and cognitive processing theory still need to be further tested and developed. (2) The scope of targeted participants needs to be expanded. Students in the stage of compulsory education should be included in future research to improve the universality of "Xu Theory". (3) The factors influencing the promoting effect of continuation task needs to be further explored. Cognitive, emotional and other learner factors need to be taken into the consideration of the design and application of "continuation task". (4) The studies on the application of continuation task in teaching and examination remains to be increased. Its controversy in constructs, testing methods, scoring rules and so on needs to be solved in future research. (5) The research scope and direction needs to be expanded and deepened. Researchers are encouraged to carry out study on the transfer effect of "continuation" and study on individual differences, exploring the promoting role of "cross-continuation". (6) The research methods and statistical tools needs to be broadened. It is recommended that future studies on the "continuation task" incorporate a wider array of scientific tools for data collection, including meta-analysis, eye-tracking experiments, virtual reality technology, corpus retrieval analysis, and others, so as to enhance the research reliability of continuation task.

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