

Discussion About the Application of Continuation Task in National Matriculation English Test: Take the National Matriculation English Test in 2020 in Zhejiang and Shandong Province Writing as An Example

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Abstract

The continuation task is a new form of reading-to-write integrated task in which test-takers read an incomplete story and then write the continuation and ending of the story. It has been increasingly used in writing assessment in China. It can test students' comprehensive ability of reading and writing. This type of writing task first appeared in 2016 National Matriculation English Test (Zhejiang Province version). In this paper, the author reviews the research and summarizes that the continuation task is more suitable for the language ability testing of Chinese college entrance examination candidates. What's more, after making a content validity analysis of the NMET (Zhejiang) and NMET (Shandong) in 2020, the author found that this task has the characteristics of moderate openness and helpful to the examination of creative thinking ability.

Key words: Reading-to-write task; The continuation task; Content validity; Writing assessment; NMET (Zhejiang); NMET (Shandong)

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, integrated reading-writing tasks have been increasingly used in large-scale, high-stakes language tests due to their high degree of authenticity, potential

for content-bias reduction, and positive washback. In the context of China, the continuation task, a new form of an integrated reading-writing task that requires students to read an essay after the passage of about 350 words, then to write a passage of about 150 words according to the key words given and the opening words of the two paragraphs. At the same time, the passage should be logically connected with the given passage and have a complete plot and structure. This type of writing task first appeared in 2016 NMET (Zhejiang), one of the largest-scale and most impactful standardized tests in China. Most of the existing studies on the continuation task focus on or explore the construct validity from theoretical perspective, such as a theoretical research on the Cultivation of multiple intelligence in the collaborative process of "Reading and Writing" (Huang, 2017) or students' difficulties and strategies in solving problems from a teaching perspective, such as analysis of writing questions after reading and exploration of teaching strategies (Zeng, 2017). This paper makes a content validity analysis of the NMET (Zhejiang) and NMET (Shandong) in 2020 to find the characteristics of this task. Then, this paper puts forward some reflections on the research findings, which is expected to provide useful references for the continuation task writing teaching in the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading-to-Write Task

In the 1980s, Kucer (1987) proposed that reading and writing should not be regarded as two separate and separate skills, which was based on the constructivism theory and cognitive theory. Understanding and analysis in the process of reading can promote writing ability greatly. From the perspective of cognition, the combination of reading and writing is the unity of receptive skills and productive skills, as well as the true reflection of language use in life and learning situations. There are

many researchers for reading-to-write tasks, such as its function to address authenticity and validity concerns in testing academic writing as well as to provide content for test takers' essays (Feak & Dobson, 1996; Read, 1990; Weigle, 2004). What's more, Braine (1989), Carson (2001) and Horowitz (1986) respectively drew a conclusion that reading in the writing tasks makes them appear more similar to academic writing assignments, based on the prevalence of reading in academic writing assignments.

In Chia, English curriculum standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision) formulated by the Ministry of Education also states that "In the process of language application, various language skills are often not used separately, and comprehension skills and expressiveness skills may be used together." Therefore, when designing teaching activities such as listening, speaking, reading, reading and writing, teachers should not only pay attention to the training of specific skills, but also pay attention to the comprehensive application of skills. As for writing, integrated reading-writing tasks meet the requirement, requiring test-takers to integrate information from source materials in producing their own texts. Therefore it has gained increasing popularity.

2.2 The Continuation Task

The continuation task is a new form of integrated reading-writing task which combines the language output and input, aiming at accelerating the improvement of students' language application ability. This task was initially theorized by Wang (2012), based on the Interactive Alignment Model (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), as an activity with substantial language learning potential. The task design of this method is simple and easy, just erase the end of a reading, let the students read intercept part, write on the basis of understanding, complete the content (Wang & Yuan, 2013). In the continuation task, learners are asked to read an incomplete story and continue it in a logical and coherent way (Wang & Wang, 2015). Moreover in the continuation task, reading is complementary, which gives priority to writing, the goal of the continuation task is to test students' comprehensive language using ability, mainly includes the following four aspects: the ability to grasp key information of the essay and the features of language ability, accurate language use's ability to grasp the discourse structure, and creative thinking ability (Liu & Chen, 2016).

In summary, the continuation task is capable of enhancing language learning efficiency, which points to a new direction for L2 writing. The continuation tasks can not only serve to test students' comprehensive language using ability, but also show its impact on students' creative thinking ability for further writing.

2.3 Content Validity

Bachman regards validity as the core of modern language testing, and the academic world has always regarded

validity as the most important to evaluate test quality (Bachman & Palmer 1999). By validity is meant the degree to which a test or examination measures what it purports to measure. Validity might also be expressed more simply as the 'worthwhileness' of an examination. Content validity is an important part of the validity test, including the relevance and coverage of validity. It refers to the representativeness of the test and the extent of coverage of curriculum objectives (Heaton, 2000). Alderson proposed that validity can be divided into internal validity, external validity and structural validity, and content validity is the most important part of internal validity. Content validity refers to whether the test covers what is specified in the syllabus or exam specification (Alderson et al.2000).

From the point of view of scoring standards, the continuation task mainly examines the ability of content creation and language use (Wang & Zhang, 2017). In terms of content, the continuation of the story should first be in harmony with the original text and the first sentence of the continuation paragraph, each paragraph should be in harmony with the original text, and at the same time each paragraph should be close to the clue of the first sentence. The second is content must be rich, using five or more underlined words in the original text, with rich and vivid details to promote the development of the plot. These two aspects give the student's continuation writing content to give the extremely strong limitation. Therefore, the reading material given is extremely important for students' writing. On the premise of understanding the subject matter, genre, structure and information of the article in place, the examinee can find the material for writing from the article. According to Bachman & Palmer's (1999), the content validity of test has six criteria: test environment, test description, text input, expected response, and the relationship between text input and expected response.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper makes a content validity analysis of the NMET (Zhejiang) and NMET (Shandong) in 2020 (among which there are two NMET in Zhejiang) to find the characteristics of this task and provide useful references for the continuation task writing teaching in the future.

The content validity of test has six criteria: test environment, test description, text input, expected response, and the relationship between text input and expected response. (Bachman & Palmer, 1999) The author adopted Bachman & Palmer's theory and put the specific situation NMET (Zhejiang) into consideration, then the author adjusted the framework and finally determined six analysis items, namely (1) length(the number of words), (2) difficulty, (3) subject matter, (4) genre, (5) structure and (6) information distribution. The six analysis items have been proved in Wang's paper (Wang, 2019).

This article is expected to find the characteristics of this task and provide useful references for the continuation task writing teaching in the future. As for research questions, this paper mainly answer two questions:

1. What is special about the continuation task of the English college entrance examination?
2. Is the combination of reading and writing task as the college entrance examination question scientific and feasible?

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Length

Table 1 lists the length of source text of outline writing test in the 3 examinations of NMET (Zhejiang) and NMET (Shandong) in 2020 (among which there are two NMET in Zhejiang). In order to express clearly, the author renumbered the source text, in which The Zhejiang January NMET is No. 1, July NMET is No. 2, and Shandong NMET is No.3. The numbers for the rest of this article are the same as the numbers here. The first step is to use the word count function in Microsoft Word software to make a preliminary count of the length of the three reading materials, in order to ensure the accuracy of the data, the author makes a second count by word count.

Table 1
The statistics of Source text length

Number	1	2	3
Length	340	313	314

The statistical results are shown in Table 1. The number of words in the three reading materials ranged from 313 to 340. Among the data, the minimum value is 313, the maximum value is 340, and the maximum differs from the minimum by 27. This indicates that stricter rules are needed to control the selection of materials in order to keep a balance of the length. Moreover, the average words of the three source texts are about 322.3 words. The reading comprehension materials should be controlled in 200-500 words and above the medium level around 300 words is ideal (Liu& Han, 2000). The NMET for selecting excellent students to enter university should belong to the category of “above average test”. Overall speaking the length of the source text of the summary writing is very close to the ideal value but needed to be more precise.

4.2 Difficulty

Reading materials in the continuation task do not emphasize the ability to distinguish details, guess words meaning, infer metaphor, and understand the author’s writing intention. Therefore the author only analyzes the number of new words and the readability of the text. Here, new words refer to words beyond the scope of the syllabus with together with translation in Chinese. Generally speaking, the more new words there are, the more difficult the essay will be. Readability refers to the

degree to which a text is easy to read and understand. The readability index (Flesch Reading Ease), listed in appendix and proposed by Flesch (1948), calculates the reading difficulty of source text according to the average sentence length and average word syllable number of an article, etc., which is still one of the most economical and simple and universal text accessibility detection formulas. The higher readability score means the simpler the text. Regarding the difficulty of the reading material, the author use Microsoft’s readability statistics.

Table 2
The statistics of source text difficulty

Number	1	2	3
New words	2	3	2
Readability score	87.9	80.4	82
Description of style	easy	easy	easy

NMET has always been cautious in terms of new words. There are 2, 3 and 2 new words in the three discourses respectively, and all of them will give the Chinese meaning of the words in specific context. In terms of readability, the scores of the three texts were 87.9, 80.4 and 82, all of which are easy, indicating that the reading materials were basically easy and would not cause difficulties for the students’ understanding of the text. In addition, the reading materials for July edition are slightly more difficult than those for January edition. This is a reasonable phenomenon, because students still have about half a year to prepare from January to July. (Wang, 2019)

4.3 Subject Matter

Themes provide the subject scope or thematic context for language learning. Students’ exploration of the meaning of the theme should be the most important content for students to learn a language. In the continuation task, themes play an important role of students’ writing. If students are not familiar with theme, it will result in students having nothing to say in the following writing.

Table 3
The statistics of source text’s subject matter

Number	1	2	3
Thematic context	human and nature	human and nature	human and society
Theme group	natural ecology	natural ecology	Social Service and interpersonal communication
Subthemes	human and environment, man and animals and plants	human and environment, man and animals and plants	good interpersonal relationship and social interaction

According to the English curriculum standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision), there are three major themes in the context of human and self, human and society, and human and nature, and these three themes also contain related sub-themes. According to table 3, number one and two have the same thematic context: natural ecology. What’s more, they also have the same subtheme that is human

and environment, man and animals and plants. Thematic context of number three is human and society and its subtheme is good interpersonal relationship and social interaction. Therefore, the themes of the three essays are very consistent with the requirements of the curriculum standards, promoting students' deep understanding of the text content and to explore the meaning of the theme.

The main character in the first reading material is a teenager and pet dog Poppy. The boy was leaving home without the little master's company, and Poppy became very lonely. The boy's parents, hoping to cheer Poppy up again, bought a puppy to keep Poppy being companied. The first paragraph of the sequel is about a puppy in a box, and students can write the paragraph to predict Poppy's reaction to the puppy. The second paragraph is about the boy coming home from school, so students can write more about the life of the boy and the two dogs. The topic of this reading material is very familiar to the students and very close to their daily life, so the students can have something to say in the sequel writing. Moreover, for students who have pets at home, the topic is very easy to arouse the emotional resonance of students.

The second reading material tells the story of one couple in which they fight a bear and then manage to escape. The emotional line of the protagonists changes from excitement and desire to panic and relaxation. As for the plot, it begins with how protagonists deal with the polar bear and manage to get rid of it. In terms of the continuation task, after the first polar bear returns, the story can be elicited by the bear's new attack. As the bear's attack intensifies, this couple needs to take new measures to avoid danger. In the second paragraph which has the continuation task, after the arrival of the helicopter, students can describe "I" escape action. The ending part of this paragraph is in harmony with the beginning, summarizing whether the purpose of the author's visit is achieved or not. Generally speaking, this reading material will stimulate students to think about the skills of surviving in the wild and the relationship between man and nature.

The third reading material is a story of three children. After their mother tells them about a poor family, they come up with a brilliant idea: to make and sell popcorn to help Bernard, the child from the family, earn money for his family. While training students' language skills, this material is used to stimulate their thinking, to help them feel the warmth between people, and at the same time, by focusing on the communication between people in the present moment, to guide students to develop good thinking quality and humanistic feelings.

To sum up, thematic context not only regulates the scope of language knowledge and cultural knowledge, but also provides meaningful context for language learning, and permeates emotions, attitudes and values.

4.4 Genre

Genre of discourse refers to narrative, argumentation, expository writing, practical writing and other different types of writing. Understanding the genre can deepen the examinee's understanding of the meaning of the text, and also plays an important role in understanding the relationship between the content and form of the text.

Table 4
The statistics of source text's genre

Number	1	2	3
Genre	narrative	narrative	narrative

According to the table, all of these three reading materials are narratives. The object of narration is often the things that happen in daily life. What's more, in narratives, the image of content is concrete and language is coherence. Due to the above characters of narratives, narratives can enhance the interest of reading, and let students feel the emotion that the story wants to convey from narrative description. However, there is a problem was that the genre is too homogeneous, so that the designers of the test paper could then use different genres of text for the reason that different types of texts have their own characteristics in form, structure and language use.

4.5 Structure

According to Wang (2019), the structural features of a text are of great importance to the understanding of its meaning. The more transparency the reading materials have, the easier and smoother students' reading experience will be. It is ideal for reading and the following continuation task if the organization of the reading material is clear and the structure of reading and the following writing is the similar.

In the first reading material, the main character in the first reading material is a teenager and pet dog Poppy. The boy was leaving home without the little master's company, and Poppy became very lonely. The boy's parents, hoping to cheer Poppy up again, bought a puppy to keep Poppy being companied. This article is simple in content and not difficult in words and mainly tells the boy's family and the dog Poppy's story.

In terms of the second article, it mainly tells the story of one couple and bear, and then they successfully escape from danger. The full text is in accordance with the development of the story, and the whole story in the students will be very complete after writing. In addition to the gradual development of the story, the protagonists' emotional changes are also a very clear clue. The change of the protagonists' mood can not only help the examinee to understand the article better, but also can inspire the students to write. The main characters' emotional line changes as follows: excited, eager, scared and relaxed. The plot line starts with how the main characters deal with the polar bear and successfully gets rid of it.

As for the third reading material, the beginning of the reading gives the background to the story: The Meredith family lived in a small community. As the economy was in decline, some people in the town had lost their jobs. Many of their families were struggling to make ends meet. What's more, the last sentence of the first paragraph presents the main idea that people were trying to help each other meet the challenges. Then the next part of the article is all about Mrs. Meredith's three children helping Bernard to come up with the idea about how to earn money to support the family. Finally, the end of the passage echoes the beginning of the passage in which three children work out a brilliant idea: to make and sell popcorn to help Bernard and his family. It is seen that the structure of the material is complete and the story is clear.

From the structural point of view, the structure of the three source texts are relatively clear, and the basic use of explicit means of connection, the relationship between paragraphs is relatively clear. A well-organized passage will not only help the examinee to better understand it, but also make it easier for the examinee to transfer the structure of the passage to the expression.

4.6 Information Distribution

According to Wang (2019), the amount of text information and the distribution of information points require the cognitive ability of selection, organization and integration. If the information is too large, it is difficult to choose, if the information points are too dense, it is difficult to distinguish, no matter which case will affect the final output of the read-write task. The author has already carried on the relatively detailed explanation to these three reading material content, the structure and so on in this article. From the above analysis, the three reading material length is suitable, the difficulty is suitable, the content conforms to the examinee daily life. All three readings are narrative, and the story is told in chronological order, with well-defined information points.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the NMET (Zhejiang) and NMET (Shandong) in 2020, the author found the following features of the continuation task in National Matriculation English Test which can fully answer the two research questions posed by the author. First, the continuation task is a new form of reading-to-write integrated task in which examinees read an incomplete story and then write the continuation and ending of the story. It has been increasingly used in writing assessment in China. It can test students' comprehensive ability of reading and writing. Second, the continuation task is not only in line with the national conditions and the level of examinees, but also in line with the "curriculum standards" requirements. From the length, difficulty, subject matter and genre of the

article, it can be found that the topic of the continuation task corresponds well to the requirements of the "curriculum standard" and conforms to the development of students' actual ability. Third, the continuation task tests students' multi-dimensional ability to achieve the goal of the test. The task of trying to combine reading and writing in the college entrance examination is not simply to superimpose the requirements of reading and writing, but to test the candidates' ability to plan, monitor, select, organize and integrate, it is a test of students' comprehensive language ability and learning ability, and also helps students to improve their critical and innovative ability through reflection and expression in language practice. Fourth, It can not only effectively test students' comprehensive ability of reading and writing, but also make use of the washback effect of the test to urge foreign language teaching and learning to closely combine comprehension and output, and organically combine the creation of content with the imitation of language, so as to improve the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning. To sum up, the continuation task as a special kind of writing in National Matriculation English Test, it is scientific and feasible to apply the continuation task to the National Matriculation English Test, which can conform to the trend of writing assessment and meet the requirements of the curriculum standard.

Based on the above characteristics, the author makes the following suggestions on the teaching of the continuation task in writing. First of all, in daily teaching, teachers should give students a certain amount of reading tasks, intensive reading and extensive reading together with teacher's guidance and students' self-reading, to help students be familiar with the narrative style and language features of English stories, at the same time, the students are instructed to accumulate vocabulary and learn to use them in a variety of situations, so that the students can write sentences that are not boring. Second, in the exercise, teachers guide students to clear the elements of the original text and the development of the reading materials. When students start to do the continuation task, they should seriously treat the usual writing practice. Thirdly, in terms of evaluation and feedback, teachers can adopt a variety of evaluation methods. In addition to teachers' personal marking, teachers should also guide students to mark and correct each other. In the process of marking and correcting each other, learners ask their peers to find errors in their writing, it is beneficial to promote the reader consciousness in writing.

For some reasons, this research still has its own limitation. On the one hand, there are only three samples in this research, the number of samples is limited. Due to the small sample size, the three reading materials in this research are all narrative texts with a single genre. Therefore, in the future research, researchers can research

different genres of text for the reason that different types of texts have their own characteristics in form, structure and language use. On the other hand, the detailed grading rules of the continuation task and the backwash effect in the actual teaching process are rarely mentioned in the current literature. Therefore, in the future, researchers can also do some research on the reception and practical effect of the continuation task in writing.

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Appendix Flesch reading ease reference scale

Readability score	Description of style	Typical magazine	Potential readers	
			School grade	% of US Adults
0- 30	Very difficult	Scientific	College	4.5
30- 50	Difficult	Academic	High school	24
50- 60	Fairly difficult	Quality	Some H.S.	40
60- 70	Standard	Digest	7th or 8th grade	75
70- 80	Fairly easy	Slick- fiction	6th grade	80
80- 90	Easy	Pulf- fiction	5th grade	86
90- 100	Very easy	Comics	4th grade	90