

# Activity Theory for Examining the Effects of the Story Continuation Writing Task on English Writing Quality

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## Abstract

Given the importance of the continuation task for English learning and testing in China and recent attempts to examine second or foreign language (L2) writing process in relation to social, cultural, and historical contexts, this study draws on the framework of Activity Theory (AT) to investigate the effects of story continuation writing task (SCWT) on Chinese high school students' writing quality. Based on performance on SCWT and responses to semi-structured interviews from eighty Chinese high school students, the findings of this study demonstrate that the exploitation of AT-informed SCWT exhibited positive effects on improving English writing quality in terms of content, structure, and language use. Students utilized the mediation within and between the activity systems to facilitate their L2 written production. This study contributes to the research on the effectiveness of SCWT through the utilization of an L2 writing instructional model that was based on AT. It also throws light on the L2 writing process mediated by the continuation task and offers pedagogical implications to the English writing classroom.

**Keywords:** story continuation writing task (SCWT); activity theory (AT); writing quality; Chinese high school students

## 1. Introduction

Writing in a second or foreign language (L2) is generally considered to be vital to the development of L2 learners' overall language proficiency. In producing written work, L2 learners reinforce and enhance their linguistic, cognitive, and communicative skills through content creation and imitation of others' language use. In the Chinese educational context where English is the primary L2, due to various reasons, the idea of learning English through imitation and creation has not received enough attention. To remedy this deficiency, Wang (2012, 2015, 2016) proposed the employment of continuation task that integrates reading comprehension with written production to improve English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing ability. To complete the continuation task, EFL learners need to write the

continuation of an incomplete reading text based on their comprehension of the text. According to Wang (2012, 2014, 2015), the continuation task may be advantageous in cultivating creative thinking, engaging learners in reading and writing, facilitating input internalization, and promoting self-correction. Additionally, the continuation task can be applied to L2 writing classrooms at almost all proficiency levels where linguistic input is insufficient.

Thus far, empirical studies have lent credence to the potential of the continuation task for fostering EFL learners' grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, and discourse coherence in their writing (Jiang & Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Jiang & Tu, 2016; Yang, 2018). Most of these studies, however, examined the effectiveness of the continuation task on the basis of the linguistic and textual aspects of the written production and paid less attention to the individual and contextual factors influencing EFL learner engagement in L2 writing activities. This may have in turn yield a limited understanding of L2 writing quality due to the social, cultural and situated nature of writing practices (Miller, 1984; Hyland, 2004; Bastian, 2010) and the close relationship between writing processes and writing quality (Breetvelt et al., 1994). Additionally, the bulk of the studies focused on college students, ignoring the fact that the continuation task was increasingly deployed as the testing task for the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) took mainly by high school students.

Activity theory (AT), with its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, situates individuals' actions in tool-mediated, purposive, and collective activities shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001). Although AT offers a solid foundation for inquiry into the L2 writing process and its influencing factors (Chen et al., 2022), studies that exploit AT to investigate the quality of L2 writing produced by learners receiving AT-informed instruction are still scant. Situated in a Chinese EFL context, the present study therefore seeks to fill the gap by adopting AT to examine the usefulness of the continuation task for promoting English learners' writing quality. Through a close examination of the most commonly used type of continuation task, notably the story continuation writing task (SCWT), the present study attempts to provide a more contextualized and insightful view on the process of SCWT-based writing. Specifically, it aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing content?
- (2) What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing structure?
- (3) What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing language?

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Studies on AT*

Since its formation in the 1920s, AT has undergone three generations of evolution according to its description of the core construct, notably the notion of activity. The first generation put

forward the importance of tool mediation to the the activity of the subject working toward the object (Vygostky, 1978), and the second generation assumed the guiding role of the motives in human activity towards a particular object (Leont'ev, 1981) and the collective nature of activity. In acknowledging the relevance of the aforementioned two generation, the third generation of AT emphasized on the tool-mediation, object-orientedness, and collectivism of an activity system. Particularly, human activities were conceived as a system consisting of six fundamental components: subject, object, community, tool, rules, and division of labour. In the activity system, *subject* is the individuals who execute the activity, and *object* is the intention and the goal of the activity. *Community* refers to individuals or group members who take the same action to achieve the goal of the activity, and *rules* denote the criterion that individuals need to follow. *Division of labour* is viewed as distribution of actions and operations among a community of individuals, and *tool* is the device mediating the execution of action. Overall, AT serves to effectively understand how the subject, drawing on the mediating effects of rules, tool, and division of labour, works toward an object within the context of a community to achieve specific outcomes.

For the reason that AT provides a robust theoretical basis for the examination of “different kinds of human practices as development processes” (Kuutti 1996, p. 25), it has been utilized to account for the development of L2 writing ability as a result of writing activities shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts in an array of studies. Lei’s study (2008), for example, demonstrated that proficient English majors in a Chinese university capitalized on tool-mediated, rule-mediated, community-mediated, and role-mediated strategies to achieve their goals and write good essays. Additionally, in 2016, Lei further compared skilled and less skilled student writers’ strategic use of mediating resources and found that skilled student writers were advantageous in the internalization and imitation of the mediating resources. In a similar vein, adopting activity theory as the framework, Kessler (2020) found that L2 English doctoral students deployed rule-, community-, and tool-mediated writing strategies as they attempted to pursue their goals and composed individual writing assignments. Chen et al. (2022) likewise investigated the complex L2 writing process mediated by automated writing assessment (AWE) and claimed that Chinese L2 English writers from a key engineering university, engaging in tool-mediated, purposive, and collective AWE-supported writing activities, employed various strategies to attain their learning goals. In Chinese academia, linking AT with project-based collaborative learning activities in an academic writing course, Zhu and Yuan (2018) contended that the mediation of rules, community, and division of labour in L2 English college students’ activity systems aided in the development of their academic English writing and critical thinking skills. In a nutshell, the investigation of the writing activities L2 learners engaged in through the lens of AT provides a more in-depth picture of their learning process.

## 2.2 Studies on the SCWT

According to Wang (2012), to complete the continuation task, L2 learners are required to read a given incomplete text and write the continuation based on their comprehension and imagination. The reading text is usually a narrative or a story, and as such, the SCWT requires writers to read the beginning part of a story and then extend or complete the story in a reasonable way. It has been suggested that the continuation task is conducive to L2 learning

due to the interactive alignment effect it generates (Pickering & Garrod, 2004; Atkinson, 2007). Specifically, in aligning with the text, L2 learners engage in coordinated interaction with the input they are comprehending and the written output they are producing, which aids in the development of L2 proficiency at various linguistic levels (Wang & Wang, 2014). Empirical studies on the continuation task evidenced the occurrence of the interactive alignment effect and its contribution to the accuracy of continuations (e.g., Miao, 2017; Peng et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022), providing ample and compelling evidence for the learning benefits of L2 alignment.

In recent years, a host of studies have been conducted in relation to the potential of the continuation task in promoting L2 learning of vocabulary (Zhang et al., 2022), grammatical structures (Wang et al., 2021), and discourse structure (Miao, 2017). This line of research also led to a better understanding of the contribution of the continuation task to the improvement of writing quality often measured by the linguistic aspect of the written production, particularly complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Jiang & Chen, 2015; Peng et al., 2020). As far as SCWT is concerned, due in part to the fact that it was increasingly employed in the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) as a testing task, a few studies have been undertaken to investigate the factors that might impact on test takers' performance on this kind of task. Ye and Ren's study (2019), for example, demonstrated that the completion of SCWT called for a knowledge transformation process in which test-takers attended to and exploited both conceptual and textual aspects of the source text. Ye et al.'s (2021) study further suggested that test takers' connecting-and-generating competence was the only significant predictor for their SCWT performance.

### *2.3 Studies on AT-informed SCWT*

Until now, Zhou's (2022) doctoral dissertation seems to be the few studies examining the SCWT through the lens of AT. Informed by AT, she investigated the development of college English majors' critical thinking quality in a Chinese university on the basis of their collaboration on the SCWT. Her finding revealed the enhancement of the participants' critical thinking quality as a result of the mediation effects of the tool, rules, and community within the participants' activity systems, as well as their solutions to the constraints of the SCWT.

As is evident from the above review of literature, despite the burgeoning interest in exploring the application of AT and the effectiveness of the SCWT, studies on the process of completing the SCWT from the perspective of AT were scant. In addition, existing studies on AT and the SCWT were mostly focused on college students. Only a handful of studies have investigated the usefulness of the SCWT for the development of L2 writing ability in Chinese high schools where students study in a fiercely competitive environment and work hard to obtain high marks in writing tasks. In view of this, the present study takes Chinese high school students into consideration and examines the effects of the SCWT on their English writing quality through the lens of AT. It is hoped that the findings of the present study provides insights for the factors underlying Chinese high schoolers' L2 writing, and offers suggestions for the betterment of their L2 writing experience and productivity.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research Approach and Design

A mixed-method approach in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected, analyzed, and compared or synthesized for interpretation to give a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions under investigation was implemented to examine the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing quality. In the present study, the quantitative data consisted of scores on the writing tests, and qualitative data were the responses to the interview questions.

#### 3.2 Participants and Setting

A total of 80 grade two students from a high school located in the southern region of China participated in this study. Aged from 15 to 17 years old, the participants included 53 boys and 47 girls. They were all native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and had been learning English as their compulsory subject since their primary education. English was their only foreign language and none of them had studied overseas or traveled to other countries. There was no significant difference in their writing ability prior to the study, as was indicated by the results of the pretest.

#### 3.3 Instruments

In the present study, the participants were asked to take a pretest and a post-test to assess the gains in their writing quality after the intervention of the SCWT. These two writing tests were the continuation tasks chosen from the semester final test papers and matched with their current writing abilities, as was evaluated by two experienced writing instructors of the school. The pretest was distributed during the first week of the semester and the post-test was given after the intervention.

Semi-structured interviews were administered to 20 participants one week after the post-test to probe their thoughts and beliefs about the effectiveness of the application of the SCWT. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted from 10 to 15 minutes for each participant. The responses to the interview questions were then transcribed and translated.

#### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from September 18, 2022 to December 30, 2022 and in total lasted 15 weeks. During the first week of the experiment, the participants took the pretest and were randomly assigned to the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). From week 2 to week 13, both the EG and the CG completed 5 SCWTs, and in week 14, the participants in both groups took the post-test. One week later, based on their writing scores in the post-test, 20 participants in the EG were chosen for the interview.

The participants in the EG received the instructional model of AT-informed SCWT that emphasized on the six components in the activity system. Specifically for subject, notably the students in the EG, they were active and autonomous in comprehending the contents of the reading text and producing their continuations. For objects, they were informed of and familiarized with the assessment criteria, including the content, structure, and language for the

quality of their written work. For community, they were assigned to groups during the writing process for the discussion of the reading text, the brainstorming of the storyline, and the evaluation of their peers' written work. Additionally, they received instruction and feedback from the teacher. For rules, they were required to follow the styles and convention of the continuation task, the English grammar rules, and the criteria for peer evaluation. For tools, mind maps were employed by the teacher for the analysis of the reading text and the outlining of the continuations. Furthermore, cooperation among group members were encouraged by the teacher to increase the productivity of teamwork. For division of labour, they were clear about their roles in their groups and their responsibilities as collaborators and writers. Overall, with the mediation of the components in the writing activity system, the participants in the EG were expected to generate SCWT of better quality. By contrast, the students in the CG were instructed to read the given text and write up the continuations individually, and received evaluation and feedback from the teacher.

A series of independent samples t-tests calculated by SPSS25.0 were exploited to determine the differences between the two groups. Writing content was analyzed on the basis of creation and relevance. Specifically, creation was assessed by fluency (the number of plots), novelty (the number of new characters and scenes) and flexibility (the number of new character relationships and perspectives) (Chen, 2022), and relevance was assessed on the basis of content cohesion (Peng, 2017), including deep cohesion, verb cohesion, logical cohesion, temporal cohesion, sentences overlap and intentional cohesion. Moreover, writing structure was analyzed in terms of the cohesion and coherence of the continuations. In particular, writing cohesion was assessed in accordance with the measurement used by Teng and Zhou (2020), which includes six indices from Coh-matrix: CRFNO1, CRFAO1, CRFSO1, CRFCWO1, LSASS1, and LSAPP1, and writing coherence was measured in light of the indices from Peng's (2017) study, including narrativity, referential cohesion, syntactic simplicity, word concreteness, adjacent sentences overlap and causal cohesion in Coh-matrix. Lastly, writing language was analyzed on the basis of the lexical use and syntactic complexity in the continuations. For the analysis of the interview data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was deployed to provide thorough explanation and further details of the research questions under investigation.

## 4. Results

### *4.1 What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing content?*

The effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' writing content were investigated in relation to the creation and relevance of the contents. The creation of the contents was measured on the basis of three indices from Chen (2022), including fluency, novelty and flexibility. The relevance of the contents was assessed on the basis of content cohesion. According to Table 1, for writing creation, the *p* values in the pretest and the post-test are 0.86 and 0.82, respectively, both of which are larger than 0.05. This result suggests that there was no conspicuous difference between the EG and CG before and after the intervention, and the two groups were at a similar level after fifteen weeks. However, the mean scores of the



EG in the pretest and the post-test were slightly higher than those of the

Table 1. Comparison of Writing Content Scores for the EG and CG in the Pretest and Post-test

Indices of writing content	Writing tests	Group	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's d
Writing creation	Pretest	EG	39	3.96	0.25	0.17	0.86	0.04
		CG	41	3.95	0.24			
	Post-test	EG	39	3.97	0.24	0.23	0.82	0.06
		CG	41	3.95	0.23			
Writing relevance	Pretest	EG	39	1.67	0.17	1.02	0.31	0.25
		CG	41	1.72	0.22			
	Post-test	EG	39	1.92	0.13	2.69	0.01*	0.64
		CG	41	1.79	0.25			

\* $p < 0.05$ . EC, experimental class; CC, control class; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

CG. Additionally, for writing relevance, the  $p$  value of the pretest for the EG and CG is 0.31, which is more than 0.05, indicating no obvious difference between the two groups before the intervention. By contrast, the  $p$  value of the post-test for the EG and CG is 0.01, which is less than 0.05 and suggests that there were noticeable distinction between the EG and CG in terms of writing relevance, and the EG outperformed the CG in the cohesion of the contents after the intervention.

Student participants' (SPs) responses to the interview questions in general support the conclusion drawn from the comparison of writing test scores. For writing creation, SP14 attributed the inadequacy of creativity in her continuations to the word and time limits, as she stated, "Even if I intended to design more plots and characters, I could not do it because I had

to write up my continuation within 200 words in such a short time period! If I had been given more time to write more words, I could have concentrated on creating more interesting plots and characters instead of having been worried about the correct use of grammar.” For writing relevance, the majority of the interviewees agreed on the usefulness of involvement with the writing community for safeguarding content cohesion, as SP10 commented on the importance of group work for the unity of ideas, “My teammates and I worked together and learned a lot from each other because we were eager to create an engaging and convincing story. Sometimes the storyline I came up with did not match the flow of the story, and discussion with my teammates got me back on the right track soon.” Another interviewee, SP5, attributed his alignment with the reading text to the division of labour in the activity systems, as he noted, “Our teacher assigned us to the roles of a leader, a recorder and a reporter. As the recorder in our group, I was responsible for taking notes and gathering ideas for plot development. The collision of thinking and exchange of thoughts indeed helped us produce more relevant stories.”

#### *4.2 What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing content?*

Table 2 shows the the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' writing structure, which were examined in relation to the cohesion and coherence of the continuations. From it, it is clear that the EG and CG did not differ in cohesion scores in the pretest since the  $p$  value is 0.92 and is much higher than 0.05. in other words, the participants in the two groups were at relatively similar level of writing cohesion prior to the intervention. In contrast, for writing cohesion scores in the post-test, the  $p$  value is 0.00, which is less than 0.05. Thus, a conclusion can be drawn that the participants in the EG outperformed those in the CG in achieving cohesion in their writing, and the application of AT-informed SCWT has greatly improved Chinese high school students' writing cohesion.

In a similar vein, for the pretest, there was no obvious difference existing between the two groups in writing coherence scores since the  $p$  value is 0.30, whereas for the post-test, the  $p$  value is 0.00, which indicates that there was obvious variation between CG and EG in the post-test. In other words, after the fifteen-week intervention, the writing coherence scores that EG obtained is higher than the ones gained by CG. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that AT-informed SCWT was effective for promoting Chinese high school students' writing coherence.

In the interview responses, many of the participants in the EG believed that the use of tools during the writing activities, particularly the exploitation of the mind maps, had contributed to the improvement of cohesion and coherence in their continuations. For example, one of the interviewees, SP16, mentioned, “I felt more confident in my writing because of our teacher's use of mind-maps to illustrate the structure of the text. In this way, I could grasp the narrative structure thoroughly and concentrate on the connection between the source text and my writing.” Additionally, feedback from peers and teacher was also deemed as essential tools to improve cohesion and coherence in the SCWT, as SP5 argued, “My teacher underlined some words in my essay, so I could understand the cohesion within a paragraph better. My teammates also reminded me of the disconnection between the topic sentence and the supporting details, which was very helpful for my revision.”



### 4.3 What are the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' English writing language?

The effects of AT-informed SCWT on writing language was measured on the basis of lexical use and syntactic complexity. As shown in Table 3, as far as lexical use is concerned, the EG

Table 2. Comparison of Writing Structure Scores for the EG and CG in the Pretest and Post-test

Indices of writing structure	Writing tests	Group	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Writing cohesion	Pretest	EG	39	1.87	0.06	-0.11	0.92	0.03
		CG	41	1.86	0.07			
	Post-test	EG	39	2.30	0.12	9.03	0.00*	2.15
		CG	41	2.09	0.10			
Writing coherence	Pretest	EG	39	4.34	0.57	1.05	0.30	0.25
		CG	41	4.22	0.41			
	Post-test	EG	39	4.87	0.52	5.65	0.00*	1.35
		CG	41	4.24	0.41			

\* $p < 0.05$ . EC, experimental class; CC, control class; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

did not differ from the CG in the pretest since the *p* value is 0.35, which is larger than 0.05. However, in the post-test, the EG noticeably outperformed the CG in lexical use, as was indicated by the value of *p*, 0.01, which is less than 0.05. In addition, for syntactic complexity, no significant difference was found between the EG and the CG in the pretest, according to the data of the *p* value, 0.68, which is more than 0.05. By contrast, in the post-test, the EG received remarkably higher scores than the CG, as was determined by the *p* value, 0.02, which is smaller than 0.05. These results indicated that the utilization of AT-informed SCWT was conducive to the development of Chinese high school students' writing language, including lexical use and syntactic complexity.

The participants' comments on the interview questions by and large corroborated the positive role of objects and rules in the betterment of their writing language. For objects, when asked about the effectiveness of SCWT for improving the formal aspect of her written production, SP12 expressed positive remarks about it as, "The reading text demonstrated the words and

grammar patterns for writing a good story, which motivated me to emulate the authors' use of the English language to ensure the consistency of the plot so that the readers would not be disappointed." Another interviewee, SP18, made a similar point by mentioning, "Our teacher stated very clearly how we would be evaluated at the beginning of the class, for example, the correct use of vocabulary and grammar. I was aware of her expectation and was more careful

Table 3. Comparison of Writing Language Scores for the EG and CG in the Pretest and Post-test.

Indices of writing language	Writing tests	Group	N	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Lexical use	Pretest	EG	39	0.49	0.02	1.97	0.35	0.49
		CG	41	0.48	0.03			
	Post-test	EG	39	0.53	0.02	9.28	0.01*	2.24
		CG	41	0.49	0.02			
Syntactic complexity	Pretest	EG	39	22.46	2.30	-0.42	0.68	0.11
		CG	41	22.72	2.72			
	Post-test	EG	39	25.70	2.07	4.96	0.02*	1.20
		CG	41	22.73	2.74			

\* $p < 0.05$ . EC, experimental class; CC, control class; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

about the choice of my language." With regard to the rules, most of the participants were certain about the usefulness of the scoring criteria in evaluating and refining their writing language, as SP8 argued, "With the scoring criteria provided by our teacher, I was able to find out the grammatical and mechanical problems in my draft and modify them accordingly. Besides, we could give more accurate and appropriate revision opinions to others."

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effects of AT-informed SCWT on Chinese high school students' writing quality. Evidence from quantitative and qualitative measures suggested that the deployment of AT-informed SCWT to a large extent improved their writing quality, particularly in the relevance of the contents, the cohesion and coherence of the structure, as well as the lexical use and syntactic complexity of the language. However, the exploitation of

AT-informed SCWT did not seem to be remarkably effective for the development of the creation of the contents. This finding echoed the previous studies exhibiting the facilitative effect of the continuation task on L2 learning at the lexical, syntactic, and discursal levels (Wang & Wang, 2014; Jiang & Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2016; Peng, 2017). In particular, it revealed that Chinese high school students, drawing on the support from their peers and teacher, were capable of making use of the linguistic, cognitive and communicative resources in the activity systems to increase their L2 writing quality. Furthermore, echoing the prior studies (e.g., Ye & Ren, 2019), it demonstrated the advantage of AT-informed SCWT in promoting content knowledge, narrative writing, and L2 use, and thereby its potential for aiding in the learning of both language and genre.

From the perspective of AT, located within the activity system, the development of writing quality in the present study can be interpreted as a collective activity where Chinese high school students (*subjects*) collaborated with their peers and teacher (*community*), with the goal of improving the quality of their story continuation writing (*objects*). Furthermore, such a developing process was mediated by the given reading text of the SCWT, the mind maps and other available artifacts (*tool*), task guidelines, evaluation criteria, and group ethnics (*rules*), as well as the roles of an L2 writer, a collaborative partner, and a reviewer (*division of labour*). Engaging in tool-mediated, goal-oriented, and community-supported activities shaped by individual and contextual factors, the students in the present study effectively mobilized various resources to enhance their writing quality.

Through the lens of the Interactive Alignment Model (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), according to Wang and Wang (2014), the coupling of comprehension and production allows for the construction of situation models conducive to the occurrence of structural priming, a process whereby L2 writing errors are reduced because L2 learners produce the content and language of the continuations in line with the reading texts. In the present study, through discussion with peers and illustration of story plots using mind maps from the teacher, Chinese high school students were acquainted with the contents of the stories, and by extension the contexts in which L2 forms are used. In this way, they had a better grasp of the vocabulary items and syntactic structures in the reading text, and were more likely to employ these linguistic expressions in their subsequent written output. In aligning contextually and linguistically with the input text, Chinese high school students enriched their knowledge about the thematic and formal aspect of the English language, which resulted in more correct use of L2 forms and fewer form-based errors in their continuations.

An unexpected finding was the little contribution that AT-informed SCWT has made to the improvement of content creation. Compared with the remarkable increase in writing structure and writing language, the inadequate progress that Chinese high school students had made in creating thoughtful and intriguing stories overtime may suggest the heavy focus of AT-informed SCWT instruction on the development of the formal rather than the imaginative aspect of the continuation task. It was also possible that the text-only input utilized in the present study was less than effective for promoting the content creation in SCWT, according to Cheng et al.'s (2022) study showing the inferiority of single-mode input compared to multimodal input in cultivating L2 learners' creative quality. Nonetheless, as Ye et al.'s (2021) study on the

construct of SCWT suggested, the strategy of connecting-and-generating, including focusing on the key characters and given storyline, was the mere significant predictor of the learners' SCWT scores. Given the increasing use of SCWT as the testing task for high-stakes and large-scale tests in China (e.g., the National Matriculation English Test (NMET)), it follows that to realize the full potential of SCWT in facilitating L2 teaching and learning, more emphases need to be placed on the source-continuation connection both in form and meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

Due to the importance of SCWT for English learning and testing (e.g., Wang, 2014; Shi et al., 2020) and recent attempts examining the developmental process of L2 writing quality (e.g., Galbraith & Vedder, 2019), the present study used both performance on SCWT tests and responses to interview questions to illuminate the growth patterns of Chinese high school students' writing quality in content, structure, and language from the perspective of AT. The findings of the present study foregrounded the potential of SCWT in enhancing the relevance of the contents, cohesion and coherence of the storyline, as well as the lexical use and syntactic structure in the continuations. In working collaboratively and individually on SCWT, Chinese high school EFL learners utilized the mediating tools, community, rules, and division of labour in the activity systems to work towards the goal of producing English composition of better quality.

One implication of the present study is that pedagogical intervention is needed to draw students' attention to content creation in the completion of SCWT. As the findings of the present study demonstrated, Chinese high school students achieved better improvement in language imitation than in content creation with the implementation of AT-informed SCWT instruction, and their interview responses revealed their overriding concern for the linguistic accuracy of their written production. However, according to Wang (2014), the initiative that SCWT requires learners to take in generating appropriate content can stimulate their willingness to communicate, increase their interest in L2 learning, and encourage their efforts to produce L2. On this basis, writing instructors need to draw students' attention to the strategies useful for creating an intriguing story. Another implication is the relevance of introducing SCWT to the English writing classes in Chinese high schools. In the present study, the students made use of the mediation of various tools and resources, including the source text, group work, and peer and teacher feedback to generate written work of better quality. The adoption of SCWT for writing practice in high school English classes would undoubtedly help drive the students' writing activity system toward the learning objectives and more efficiently prepare them for high-stake English tests.

The present study is limited by its main focus on L2 learners with the same proficiency levels, and therefore further research is needed to take into account various proficiency levels in making up pairs in the collaborative work to better understand the effectiveness of community mediation. Additionally, the present study merely investigated the interaction between the components within the activity system. Future studies can thus include the contradictions arising from within and between the activity systems to offer solutions to the students'

transformation into more proficient L2 learners.

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