

Effects of Alignment in Narrative and Expository Continuation Tasks: An Empirical Study

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This study investigates the effects of alignment in the narrative and expository continuation tasks. Two groups of English learners ($N = 50$) in a Chinese university were required to continue one narrative essay and one expository essay, both of which had an English version and a Chinese version. The analysis of the data using the Antconc software demonstrated that the effects of alignment occurred in the two types of continued compositions to some extent. And learners committed fewer errors when continuing the English-version task. In addition, learners were required to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire results showed that the continuation task, as a practical teaching mode, can facilitate the students' writing and learning.

Keywords: alignment, continuation task, narrative, expository

Introduction

The teaching of English writing has been of crucial importance in cultivating students' language proficiency. Wang (2012) first proposed that "story continuation" is a new way to improve writing efficiency. Based on the interactive and collaborative model, this new teaching model will stimulate students' willingness to express themselves, thus integrating imitation and creation in the writing tasks. In the continuation tasks students' understanding of the original text and their output can create the effect of alignment, thus promoting the effect of learning. A considerable number of studies have reported the positive effect of story continuation on students' writing performance. C. M. Wang and M. Wang (2015) studied the alignment in continuing the English stories. Alignment occurs when learners performed the English-version task, as they used more lexical items in the original story. Jiang and Chen (2015) examined the continuation task on written accuracy, complexity, and fluency by comparing English learners' performance. The comparison revealed that English learners achieved more gains in L2 writing. Xiao (2013) explored the effect of alignment on accuracy in writing, and found that learners committed fewer errors when they were able to read back the original text. Students tend to select the expressions in the reading materials, which greatly reduces the errors in continued compositions, thus improving the language accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

Although the effect of alignment has been proved and story continuation can promote English learning, previous studies mainly adopt narrative reading materials and participants involved are mostly English majors. In light of this, following the research of C. M. Wang and M. Wang, we investigated the effect of alignment in the narrative and expository continuation tasks of non-English majors. This study intends to answer the

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following questions:

1. Does alignment exist in the expository continuation tasks compared with the narrative tasks?
2. What affects the alignment of continued compositions in the continuation tasks?

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted in a course of English in a Chinese university. A total of 50 first-year students majoring in administration, design, communications, industrial engineering, and medical imaging were divided into two groups ($N = 25$). The placement test results showed that they were at intermediate level of proficiency and none of them had studied in an English-speaking country.

Experimental Design

The reading materials involved in this study are two texts, each of which has an English and a Chinese version. "Tom Edison's Shaggy Dog" (Text 1) is an English story of about 950 words, whose ending has been removed. In Text 1, a stranger told Bullard a story of Edison's dog. Text 2 titled "How Deep Is Your Love?" is an expository essay of about 500 words, in which two generations express their understanding of true love. Two groups of participants were required to read the Chinese and English versions of two texts respectively and then complete their continued compositions in 60 minutes.

After finishing the continuation tasks, we conducted a questionnaire survey on this teaching mode. Participants were asked to answer some questions:

1. Do you think that the continuation task is helpful in improving your writing?
2. What do you consider when you perform the continuation task?

Data Collection and Analysis

After the participants completed their tasks, all the continued compositions were typed into the computer. Four corpora were established according to the topic and language, each of which has 25 compositions.

Data were mainly collected using Antconc 3.4.4. Firstly, in order to investigate the differences in the use of words, we compared the keyword list of the target corpus with the reference corpus, so as to find out the abnormally high frequency keywords. Then their lexical characteristics were analyzed with the keyness. Secondly, in order to investigate the syntactic differences, the N-gram was used to analyze the use of four-word phrases in the continuation. In addition, all the common errors related to the use of words in the compositions were marked and then analyzed, such as errors of agreement in number, articles, link verbs, non-finites, and tenses.

Results

This study was conducted to investigate whether alignment occurs in the narrative and expository continuation writing tasks. As discussed above, participants continued two texts, and produced 422 words and 442 words on the English-version narrative and expository tasks, 420 words and 436 words on the Chinese-version tasks. The relatively similar length of continued compositions indicates that the input language has no significant impact on the compositions produced.

Lexical Differences

Table 1 shows 20 abnormally high frequency words in two corpora of expository continued compositions arranged according to the keyness. The higher the keyness, the greater the difference in word frequency in the target corpora and reference corpora. As can be seen, English learners tend to use more words in the original text when continuing the English-version task in comparison with the Chinese-version task. The most frequently used words include *for*, *younger*, *lives*, *older*, *different*, *ages*, *stay*, *buildings*, etc. Keywords like *for*, *was*, *easy*, *say*, *is* appear in the original text only for two to five times, yet the keyword *for* was repeated for 111 times, *was* for 49 times, and *it* for 268 times in the English-version continued compositions, while they did not appear in Chinese-version continued compositions. The words that appeared in the Chinese-version continued composition are *our* (100), *other* (70), and *we* (168).

Table 1

20 Abnormally High Frequency Keywords in Continued Compositions of Text 1

Ranking	The English-version task			The Chinese-version task		
	Keywords	Keyness	Frequency	Keywords	Keyness	Frequency
1	For	15.839	111(0)	Quickly	14.214	15(2)
2	Was	12.522	49(0)	Our	12.389	100(0)
3	Younger	11.381	25(0)	Father	9.461	7(0)
4	Lives	11.373	8(0)	Put	9.405	11(0)
5	Children	9.951	7(0)	Keep	8.235	10(1)
6	Easy	9.404	13(2)	Cultivate	8.110	6(0)
7	Ages	8.530	6(30)	Won	8.110	6(0)
8	House	8.530	6(0)	Mature	7.343	14(3)
9	Older	8.530	6(0)	Other	7.270	70(0)
10	Stay	8.530	6(0)	Ability	6.758	5(0)
11	People	8.419	82(0)	Again	6.758	5(0)
12	Me	8.406	25(0)	Free	6.758	5(0)
13	Different	7.824	21(0)	Mother	6.758	5(0)
14	Building	7.644	9(0)	Tell	6.758	5(0)
15	Material	7.644	9(0)	Will	6.496	52(0)
16	Truth	7.644	9(0)	We	6.445	168(0)
17	Is	7.605	278(0)	Once	6.403	15(0)
18	It	7.361	165(0)	With	5.733	112(0)
19	Hand	7.179	11(0)	Happiness	5.539	14(0)
20	Build	7.108	5(0)	Support	5.472	12(0)

It is worth mentioning that a significant difference was found in the choice of verbs between the two continued compositions. Both the present form and past form of link verb *be* appeared in the English-version task, and *was* was more frequently used than in the Chinese-version task (49:6). A possible explanation for this might be that participants are largely influenced by the tenses and word forms in the original text. Their contextual knowledge has been activated, thus producing more past forms of verbs.

In contrast with the expository continuation task, learners were apparently influenced by the input language when continuing the narrative text. As is shown in Table 2, most of abnormally high frequency keywords in continued compositions of Text 2 used by the participants in continuing the English-version task

were found in the original text, such as *analyzer*, *said*, *intelligence*, and *shaggy*. The keyword *said* appeared 163 times, *intelligence* 100 times, and *do* 40 times, but these words did not appear in continuing the Chinese-version task.

Table 2

15 Abnormally High Frequency Keywords in Continued Compositions of Text 2

Ranking	The English-version task			The Chinese-version task		
	Keywords	Keyness	Frequency	Keywords	Keyness	Frequency
1	Analyzer	26.944	64(0)	Brard	27.257	63(0)
2	Bullard	19.289	141(0)	Machine	24.187	70(0)
3	Bobby	16.458	13(0)	Analysis	20.742	21(0)
4	Said	11.682	163(0)	Quite	16.657	15(0)
5	Intelligence	11.360	100(0)	Spark	12.931	8(0)
6	Shaggy	11.086	36(0)	Brad	12.114	7(0)
7	Eleven	10.128	8(0)	Anyone	10.600	18(0)
8	Do	10.034	40(0)	Industry	9.502	6(0)
9	Two	8.862	7(0)	Iq	9.086	6(0)
10	Decided	7.596	7(0)	Ridiculous	9.086	6(0)
11	Leg	7.596	6(0)	Talking	9.086	6(0)
12	Suddenly	7.313	6(0)	Toni	9.086	6(0)
13	Tom	6.737	15(0)	Woman	9.086	6(0)
14	Face	6.423	12(0)	Intelligent	7.861	18(0)
15	Neighbor	6.407	14(4)	More	7.766	21(0)
16	Ahead	6.330	9(0)	Ball	7.571	5(0)
17	Antony	6.330	5(0)	Friend	7.571	5(0)
18	Drifter	6.330	5(0)	Matter	7.571	5(0)
19	Pulling	6.330	5(0)	Memory	7.571	5(0)
20	Screen	6.330	5(0)	Telling	7.571	5(0)

Contrary to the expository continuation task, the present tense appeared more frequently in the English-version composition than that in the Chinese-version composition of the narrative text (170:4). This result may be explained by the fact the original English story requires the inclusion of more dialogues between characters. Therefore, learners tend to use the present tense more in coordination with the original story.

Syntactic Differences

In order to investigate the syntactic features, we compared the differences in the use of four-word phrases in the continued compositions of narrative and expository texts. Statistical results showed that no conspicuous effect of alignment could be found in the expository compositions. An approximate number of high frequency lexical chunks appeared in the two tasks. The 20 highest frequency lexical chunks appeared 76 times in the English-version composition, and 68 times in the Chinese-version composition. Of these lexical chunks 8% and 5% could be found in the original texts.

In contrast, more four-word phrases were repeatedly used in narrative continuations. The 20 highest frequency lexical chunks appeared 90 times in the English-version composition, 10 of which could be found in the original text, accounting for 52% of the total frequency ratio. These lexical chunks appeared 98 times in the Chinese-version composition, but only two lexical chunks could be found in the original text, accounting for

only 10% of the total frequency ratio. The repeated use of four-word phrases in the original text by participants shows that the alignment exists at the syntactic level.

Statistical Results of Errors

Table 3

Statistical Results of Errors in the Continued Compositions of Two Different Tasks (per 100 Words)

Type of texts	Language	Agreement in number	Article	Link verb	Non-finites	Tense
Expository texts	English	4.11	1.75	1.71	2.12	2.33
	Chinese	4.13	2.17	1.18	2.84	3.36
Narrative texts	English	2.14	1.98	1.56	2.19	4.64
	Chinese	2.12	2.05	1.61	2.23	2.80

Table 3 shows the language errors committed on average in the continued compositions of expository and narrative texts. As can be seen, the language errors made by the participants when continuing the English-version task are generally fewer than errors made when continuing the Chinese-version task. Participants committed slightly fewer language errors in article, non-finites, and tense and more errors in link verbs in continued compositions of the expository English-version task than compositions of the Chinese-version task. On the other hand, the continued compositions of the narrative English-version task were better than compositions of the Chinese-version task in article, link verbs, non-finite, and especially in tense.

Results of the Questionnaire

Table 4

Students' Opinion on the Effect of the Continuation Task in Foreign Language Writing

Answers	Responders	Percentage (%)
Yes	34	68
No	10	20
Not sure	6	11

A total of 50 valid questionnaires were received. Table 4 shows the students' opinion on continuation tasks in EFL writing. As can be seen, a majority of students (68%) held a positive attitude towards the continuation task. They thought it an effective way to facilitate their writing efficiency. About 20% of the students surveyed held a negative attitude and 11% were not sure, which reflected the fact that students are reluctant to accept the new mode due to lack of knowledge about it.

Table 5

Factors That Affect Students' Continuation Performance

Factors	Narrative task	Percentage (%)	Expository task	Percentage (%)
Understanding of the original text	28	57	8	16.5
Cohesion between the original text and the continuation	8	17	8	16.5
Characterization	8	15	/	/
Language	5	9	10	19
Ideas and structure	/	/	24	48
Others	1	2	/	/

As to the factors affecting students' continuation performance, the understanding of the original text (57%) is of vital importance for the narrative continuation task, while ideas and structure (48%) is more critical for the expository one (see Table 5). The students surveyed shared a common view in terms of cohesion between the original text and the continuation, which ranked second among all the factors. This result may be explained by the fact that students have been aware of the characteristics of the continuation task and distinguished it from the topic writing task.

Discussions and Conclusions

As in previous literature, the continuation tasks are mostly based on the stories, or narrative texts, and few scholars focus on the influence of the genre on the effect of alignment. This study compared the continued compositions of the English-version and Chinese-version narrative and expository tasks. Results showed that alignment manifested itself in the continuation when learners did the English-version task, because learners repeatedly used words, lexical chunks, and syntactic structures in the original text, which further confirms the research findings of C. M. Wang and M. Wang (2014). When reading English materials, learners activate the linguistic knowledge in their minds that constructs a situation that matches the original text. On this basis, learners try to fully understand the language and structure of the original text by using the information in the reading materials, so as to interact with and keep consistent with the original text. Therefore, when continuing the English-version task, learners will imitate the expressions of the original text, thus committing fewer language errors.

However, it is worthy of note that there is a significant difference between the alignment of the expository text and that of the narrative text. As the research results show, no significant alignment at lexical and syntactic levels can be found in the expository task. Firstly, the use of lexical items in the original text was also found in the continuation of the Chinese-version task, which may be attributable to the length of reading materials. The expository text is as long as half of the narrative text, so learners can memorize more lexical items, thus increasing the frequency of word use. Secondly, the frequency of four-word phrases in expository writing is significantly lower than that in narrative writing. The expository text, compared with narrative text, aims to convey complex and accurate ideas, which requires the use of various sentence patterns. Otherwise, the text will be boring. Therefore, learners tend to express their ideas with more various types of complex sentences. This reason can also explain why the language errors in the expository English-version task are basically as many as errors in the Chinese-version task.

In addition, different from the research results of C. M. Wang and M. Wang, this study did not show significant difference in language errors in the English-version task and the Chinese-version task of the expository text. Although the words and sentences in Text 1 are not complex, the ironic tone between the lines may make it more difficult to understand. Learners may find it difficult to fully understand the original text, thus producing less satisfying continued compositions. Therefore, the understanding of the original text is the most critical factor for the continuation of narrative texts, while the expository continued compositions are greatly influenced by the ideas and structure. This can be demonstrated from the characteristics of these two types of texts.

Research results also showed that the effect of alignment in the continuation tasks had a positive effect on the writing of English learners. This suggests that students have a relatively high acceptance level on the new mode although they are not informed of any knowledge in advance. If they are equipped with adequate

knowledge about the continuation task and given an in-depth analysis of the original text, there will be a high possibility that more students accept the continuation task as an effective tool in English classrooms.

On the basis of the above analysis and discussion, we can see that the effect of alignment occurs to some degree in both narrative and expository continuation tasks. As the quality of the continued compositions depends significantly upon the understanding, ideas, and structure of the original text, teachers should select appropriate reading materials and analyze them to help learners deepen their understanding. Only in this way can this teaching mode improve learners' writing ability, thus promoting the learning of English.

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